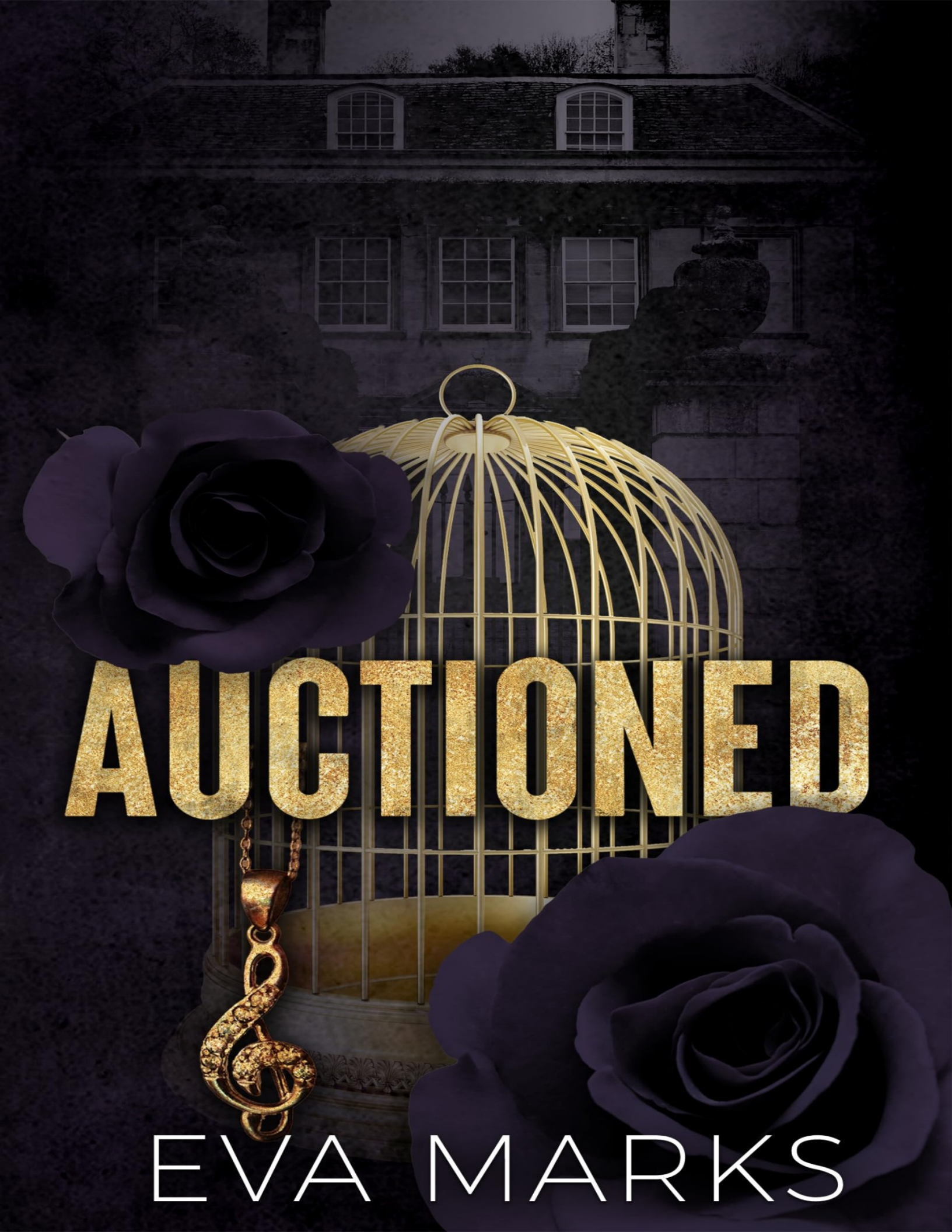
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CONTENTS

A Note from the Author
Dedication
Playlist
About the Book

1. Ophelia
2. Ophelia
3. James
4. James
5. Ophelia
6. Ophelia
7. Ophelia
8. James
9. Ophelia
10. James
11. James
12. Ophelia
13. Ophelia
14. James
15. Ophelia
16. Ophelia
17. Ophelia
18. James
19. James
20. Ophelia
21. James
22. James
23. Ophelia
24. James
25. James
26. Ophelia
27. James

28. James
29. James
30. James
31. Ophelia
32. James
33. James
34. Ophelia
35. Ophelia
36. James
37. Ophelia
38. James
39. Ophelia
40. James

Epilogue

Afterword
About the Author
More Books from Eva Marks

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Auctioned is a dark, steamy romance.
It contains explicit, disturbing, and graphic scenes and kinks intended for mature audiences only.

Full list of trigger warnings, content warnings and kinks can be found on my website www.evamarkswrites.com.

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DEDICATION

For everyone who's old enough to date him…
Or his daddy.

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PLAYLIST

ThatBehavior, Lunis — “No Time to Die”

Valerie Broussard — “A Little Wicked”

The Beast — “Old Caltone”

Merci Raines — “The Devil is a Gentleman”

FJØRA — “Better Watch Your Back”

Saysh, Anderson Rocio — “New Tradition”

Aelya — “Devil Eyes”

Saint Mesa — “Throne”

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ABOUT THE BOOK

I can save her from the auction. But no one can save her from me…

For decades, my family and the Morgans have auctioned off women to the highest bidder.
I worked against them in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to end it all. To end them, then start over somewhere else.
Alone.
Until my son chose Ophelia to be the one he'd trick into being his girlfriend.
The woman he'd put up for auction.
My obsession.

Ophelia is beautiful. Innocent. Too good to be kidnapped and sold off.
Way too good to be with a heartless man like me.

I should let the men I hired take her away from all of this.
It's the right thing to do.
Except right or wrong doesn't matter when it comes to her.
Nothing matters other than having her.
I'll pay any price to be the highest bidder.
She is going to be mine.
My captive. My property. My woman.

I’ll kill anyone who tries to take her from me.
Anyone.
Even my own son.

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1

OPHELIA

"Ophelia, your days as a free woman are over." My eyes fly up to Topher, my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend. The casual tone of his voice doesn't match his weird, fucked-up announcement, so I must've misheard him. I must have. "We're having an auction tomorrow, and you'll be sold to the highest bidder. I hope you understand."

My fork and knife clatter on the table.

The steak on my plate hasn't been holding my interest to begin with.

Auction?

Highest bidder?

Hope I fucking understand?

What the hell?

I shouldn't even be here. Yesterday, I gave him the infamous *We need to talk* line over the phone. He asked me for one last dinner at his dad's place, which I foolishly agreed to.

A dinner, that's all. Not this.

My mind races as Topher's words replay in my head.

Snap out of it!

"Topher?"

He sits across from me at the long table in the dining room. His expression is blank, his mouth sealed. He can't do that to me.

After the bomb he's dropped on me, I'm owed an explanation. A million of them.

"Topher, what did you just say?"

Nothing.

His father, James, who sits at head of the table, is equally silent. I don't dare look at him.

Can't, since my mind is still hard at work. Since I'm frozen in place, furious and shocked. What the hell is this?

I couldn't have heard it.

You'll be sold to the highest bidder.

If he were actually saying what I think he did, James would have intervened.

Selling people is illegal. He's a lawyer; he has to know that.

He doesn't even have to care about me to realize that it's against the law. That it's wrong.

James and I have only met three times over the last month, five months after I started dating Topher. The impersonal dinners we've had in his mansion on the outskirts of New York City is not a lot to go on, true. We aren't friends.

But he's given me the impression of being a serious, no-nonsense type of man.

And if selling me isn't nonsense, I don't know what is.

Yup. I must've misheard Topher, then.

Deep breath.

"Topher?" I stare straight at the man in the perfectly pressed navy suit. His gaze is no longer on me.

He's cutting into his steak.

Calmly. Another obvious sign that I had to have misheard him.

Of course I have.

After a long week at work, I'm exhausted. I love my job as a server, but pulling double shifts at the restaurant has taken its toll on me. That could definitely explain my disorientation.

Plus, I'm a nervous wreck. My stomach has been in knots ever since I decided to break up with Topher. I hardly ever dated anyone before him. I never broke up with anyone.

So yeah, my mind must be playing tricks on me.

"Hello?" I wave my hand to grab his attention. I should be embarrassed to raise my voice in front of James, who's always so put together. The man who makes my heart race. Today, I don't care. Mostly. "Earth to Topher?"

“You will be”—the steak’s juices paint the white porcelain plate in a dark shade of caramel—“auctioned off.”

Again with this auction thing.

This has to be a joke. One that isn’t even remotely funny.

I squint, staring at him silently. Waiting for the punchline.

It must be there somewhere. I’m just not looking closely enough.

But nothing’s out of place.

He looks the same as he did when he came to pick me up this evening.

His thick, dark, and short hair is styled to perfection. The oval shape of his jaw is set in place. He isn’t smiling or rubbing his mouth to hide the twitch of his lips.

Narrowed, harsh, pale-blue eyes glare at me.

He’s not fucking around.

This isn’t some sick joke.

Foolish me. Why would I think it is?

Topher hasn’t been remotely funny over the six months we’ve been dating.

In fact, since the day he took a seat next to me on the bench in Union Square, he’s always been somber. Definitely not what one would call funny.

For the first few weeks we’d been seeing each other, he’d been dark and mysterious. Since then, he’s been cold to me, and not in an attractive kind of way.

Not like his dad.

James. The man I haven’t been able to get out of my head ever since that first dinner at his place. Where Topher is uncaring and bland, there’s something about James that’s more than appealing to me. An aura.

I’ve been gravitating toward him for over a month.

I haven’t been able to stop.

At what I assume is six feet four—an inch or two taller than his son—James has the darkest presence I’ve ever come across. It isn’t fake. He isn’t putting on a show.

He’s simply dark.

Impossible to ignore.

His soul seems just as black as the outfit he dons today over his broad frame.

The rest of him is just as imposing.

Eyes that are icy blue.

Jaw so sharp it could do more than cut a person—it could make them bleed out and die at his feet.

Hair as dark as the night, cut short on the sides and a little longer on top.

Maybe he'll help me. For that to happen, I have to shake off this terror that clutches onto every part of my being.

Except I'm unable to bring myself to look him in the eye. I look at his hands instead.

His hands. Fuck. I shouldn't be comparing them to Topher's in a situation like this.

I do.

They're large like his. But James's fingers are longer. More elegant.

And one of his hands is tattooed.

The rose with the blood droplets tattooed on the back of his palm seems almost angry.

As the last words Topher said mess with my head, I search James's body language for signs. Anything that might mean that he, too, thinks Topher is in the wrong.

No movement comes from the head of the table. James's hands are flattened on the table top. His steak remains untouched.

I'll have to face Topher alone, then.

Won't be the first time I've had to stand up for myself.

I've got this.

Topher drops the piece of his filet into his mouth and offers me his famous *so what* look. His *You'll take the breadcrumbs I'm willing to offer you* look—another reason why I've been meaning to end our relationship.

I will end it.

If I make it out of here.

Wait. Why wouldn't I? They can't—they don't own me. They won't sell me.

The pressure in my chest intensifies. My blood temperature rises. I can't think straight. I can't bring myself to get up.

I guess I'll have to ask for help after all.

I brace myself before raising my gaze to James's face.

His frosty eyes, framed by thick, dark lashes, stare back at me. They remind me of sleet falling outside my window at night.

Something's brewing behind them. An emotion I can't quite put my finger on. I wish I could.

Before this evening, I thought it hadn't been fair to Topher. Me, being drawn to his dad. I'd been captivated by him in ways I shouldn't have. I hated it. Hated longing for a man who wasn't my boyfriend.

Hated that I acknowledged he was the hotter of the two.

This, too, is yet another reason for me to put this relationship and both Hawthorne men behind me.

They're wrong for me. Both of them. Even though they're my type.

Men who promise nothing but stomp all over my heart and leave me for dead. A rollercoaster that ends with my soul thrown out of the cart. Months of tears, sad songs, and heartache ensue once they've had their fun.

During my short twenty-four years, I've had three of those.

Topher is the last one, the youngest one I've ever dated. He's three years my junior, but I wanted him.

He used to be a dominant man who would simply announce that he was taking me on a date via text. Appeared at my doorstep every Friday night after a long shift and demanded we go out to a restaurant for a late-night dinner. Told me I couldn't talk to other guys.

He'd been a delicious red flag.

When he changed, I started losing interest.

He wouldn't touch me. Wouldn't try to fuck me like the other guys I'd been with had. I never let anyone get farther than a kiss, but that's not the point.

The point is, the tension had been insane.

With Topher, nothing happened. He's been against touching me since day one. Against sex before marriage. We hardly ever kissed.

I'd been hoping that he'd grow out of it.

He hasn't. He's become increasingly distant by the day and not in a good, sexy way. Called and visited less.

Since I couldn't forget how good we had it early on, I gave our relationship another chance. Then another. He was supposed to revert to being his old self.

No such luck.

Which—Why am I having these thoughts right now?

Whatever's going on here, I need to stay on top of it.

Losing my virginity should be the farthest thing from my mind when Topher's words hang in the air between the three of us.

His deranged, violent words.

My tongue is heavy as both men stick to their silence. As I wordlessly beg James to tell Topher that even if he's twenty-one, he's still his son. He can still order him to stop it.

He stares back. Silent.

Infuriating.

The sound of a knife slicing into meat snaps my attention back to Topher. "He's not going to help you, Ophelia."

My heart slows.

He's right. No one will.

Because there's no one here.

The expansive dining room is empty but for these two men, me, and our food.

For the first time tonight, I notice that the staff left after they put the plates on the table and poured our wine. They haven't been back since.

The other times I'd been here, they'd always stayed close by.

Ready with a decanter at hand. Hovering over us to change the silverware to fit each dish. Lingering in the corners of the room in case James or Topher called for them.

I've been left here to fend for myself. They even took my coat and purse. My phone.

It's just me and my thin, black sheath dress against the world.

Against this… this…

Again, what the fuck is this?

My body is numb. Shock has stripped the fight off me.

Years of being an orphan and growing up in the foster care system had taught me better than this.

Get up. Get up. Get up.

Get. Up.

The heavy chair scratches the wood floor when I stand up abruptly. The sound is a thunder bumping across the room. The high ceilings.

"You're delusional." I point a finger at Topher, doing my best to rein in the tremors. "This is the twenty-first century. We're in New fucking York. You don't put people on *auction*. You don't do anything without their consent."

He lowers the fork and knife. "Sit down."

His perfect façade has a crack in it. An emotion bursts through. Except this isn't any better, being the subject of his wrath.

Another emotion flashes there, but it's gone in a heartbeat.

Only wrath remains.

"No." A high-pitched cackle slips past my lips. It's funny. Hilarious. "No."

Why am I even taking him seriously?

Maybe this is Topher having a tantrum. Maybe he sensed I was about to break up with him, so he's being sour about it.

The guilt that's been eating at me demands that I let him get it out of his system.

Thing is, I've never been a doormat. I punched one of my foster siblings' throats for far less than this.

"Sit down," he repeats.

I take a hesitant step away from him. The backs of my knees hit the chair.

"You're clearly high." This has to be it. Some rich people's drug that makes them look lucid. "And I'm not waiting around for you to sober up. This dinner is over. James?"

His lips remain in that firm line I've come to know. I force myself to stop thinking about how devastatingly handsome he is. I won't. I need to leave here. I need to focus on Topher, who's closest to me.

"Fine. Fine. I get it. He's your son. All right then. Finish your dinner." I take a shaky step back, pushing the chair back with me. "Sleep it off. We'll talk in the morning."

We won't. I'm blocking this crazy asshole everywhere.

My purse. I have to get it. Have to call my roommate, Sage. Her family comes from old money like Topher's. They run in the same circles. Have known each other since birth.

She's slumming it to stick it to her mom, but she can still ask her to help me. They have James's address. They'll send someone here to save me.

The police, even.

I probably won't have a chance to say much other than scream for help before these two catch me.

I'm sure they will.

These men are tall. Lean. They won't be running in heels.

But if I reach my phone before that, I'll be saved.

I won't be gang-raped. I won't get sucked into this…what? Auction roleplay where both men end up winning?

Where both of them get to fake-bid, then have me as their sex doll to use?

A shiver runs through my body. My teeth clink.

I slowly step away from the table. I won't run right away. Won't risk stumbling on my high heels or encourage them to chase me.

Slipping out of here is my only chance to survive this.

"Ophelia." This is James. He hasn't moved to get up. Neither has Topher.

The predators just stare at me.

My skin prickles, and I hug myself.

The cold outside the house somehow managed to filter through the thick windows. It freezes my bones, despite the mansion being heated.

Another step back.

"Stop it. You can't hurt me. You have too much to lose, remember?" Reasoning with them could cut through their drug-like haze. It has to. "Mr. Hawthorne. Your law firm. *Criminal* law firm. You know there's no such thing as the perfect crime, don't you? You'll get caught, and it won't be just you. It'll be Topher too. His future as a lawyer will be ruined. Your other partner will lose everything. Think about it."

They rise to stand without a word. Buttoning up their suit jackets.

My purse. Get it, now.

Maisie, a lovely brunette from their staff, took it earlier. I have no idea where she's keeping it. She needs to give it back. This minute.

"Maisie!" I scream as I take a few more steps toward the doorway that connects this room to the family kitchen area. From there, there's a doorway to the living room. I'll have to go through those to get out of here. I will get out of here. "Maisie! Anyone! Help!"

James and Topher are in my line of sight as I walk backward. It'll be a huge mistake to turn my back on them. It'll seal my fate.

So I don't.

"G-go drink some water. Sober the fuck up. Stop—Stop looking at me like that."

"We're sober." Topher slides his hand into his suit pocket, retrieving a pair of thin handcuffs. They glint in the low light. A second is all I give myself to look at it before returning my attention to both men's faces. "And serious about this. There will be an auction. You will be put up on stage. The most influential people in the city will place their bid. They'll be

bidding on you, in case we weren't clear. By the end of the night, one of them will own you."

My back hits the wall instead of the doorway. I don't recover fast enough. They're on me, both of them. Surrounding me.

James to my right. Topher to my left. I'm five feet two, and they tower over me. Heels or no heels.

Fuck, it's terrifying. The ice swimming in my veins is about to reach my lungs and suffocate me.

No.

No.

"Why are you so against it, anyway?" Topher dangles the handcuffs in my face, slamming a hand on the wall next to my head. "You were the one who wouldn't shut up about…experimenting."

Oh my God. Oh my God.

He's talking about it next to James.

I would've let the ground swallow me whole, but my goddamn life is on the line. "Fuck you."

"Someone else will." Topher edges closer as James remains a firm wall at my side. There'll be no pushing him out of the way. "Unfortunate, since I could've had fun, plowing through your virgin pussy. But hey, at least I get to cuff you."

"You're insane!" I'm frozen when I should fight. Throw punches. Kick. Something. Stupid limbs, they won't work, so I shout. I don't stop shouting. "What are you talking about? Let me go, Topher! James! Please!"

I feel James's warmth on my other side. He's as present for this as Topher is. As much of a threat. He steps closer to me, showing his true intentions.

He isn't enabling Topher. He's his accomplice.

My heart races. My instincts scream at me to snatch the cuffs from Topher before he puts them on me. To duck beneath his arm and run. Throw a chair at one of the huge paned windows. Squeeze between the shards and get the fuck out of here.

Save myself.

"You should be proud. Someone will pay a lot for an untouched cunt. A beautiful woman to keep their bed or their basement warm at night." Topher's blue eyes darken. "You'll get to experiment with them, Ophelia. You'll experiment so fucking much."

He leans into me.

That's it.

This.

Is.

It.

In the brief moment I have to think, the rage at being hounded like an animal prevails.

I slap Topher across his face, scratching his cheek. "Go to hell."

His lips—the lips that I kissed and now repulse me—part in shock. Then they curl into a wicked smirk.

James hasn't done anything yet. He's…there. I smell the faint spice of his expensive cologne. I want to taste it.

I…

I'm a fool. He's here to hurt me, this predator, and I'm falling right into his trap.

These men are psychotic. Or on a bad trip.

They're preying on me.

So, no.

No sniffing Topher's dad.

No looking at his son and wondering why I've wasted six months of my life on a man who wouldn't show me warmth and genuine kindness.

Who I stopped liking months ago.

Adrenaline, fear, and the need to fight pummel into my hand. They make me curl it into a fist.

I raise it a second time.

It's in the air, about to be thrown into Topher's cheek. He has one hand on the wall, the other gripping the cuffs. If I move fast enough, I could get him. I could—

"Enough." A large hand with a bleeding rose tattoo wraps around my wrist. "This little tantrum has to end at some point. Time to go."

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2

OPHELIA

I whip my head to the source of the low, rugged voice. I was wrong about him. James's eyes don't remind me of sleet.

They remind me of that night.

Blue and red lights flashing across Brielle's, my then best friend's house.

Two men in uniform knocking on her door.

We're here for Ophelia. Ophelia Monroe. She's supposed to be spending the night here.

Brielle's mom's hand rested on the top of my head. She trembled.

I was five-years-old. My black hair in pigtails, and my dark eyes wide as one of the police officers crouched to my eye level.

We're so sorry, sweetheart. There was an accident. The plane your parents were on crashed. There were no survivors. Is there anyone we can contact on your behalf?

No one to call. No family left. No money, either. My parents spent what little they had on the plane tickets to Seattle. Dad traveled for a job interview. It'd taken me years to understand that both my parents had been unemployed for months.

It wasn't cold that day. No sleet. No rain.

It was springtime.

Finding out you're alone like that, though? That'll suck the warmth right out of the room. Out of your bones.

James's gaze is just that. Cold. Aloof.

Terrifying.

“Let me go.” The longer I stare back, the less conviction there is in my voice.

His head cocks. Eyebrows lower.

His expression shifts a fraction.

Is he…

Hope flutters in my chest.

Does he care about me? Does he finally see me, the person?

He could. Then he’d be my hero. If someone has the power to fix this, it’s him.

But he doesn’t. Because—*gross*—Topher’s lips are on my shoulder. His hand makes a fist in my hair.

I’m seconds from throwing up, and James is staring at his son, who’s pressing his mouth to my body.

But he just stands there.

He won’t save me. It’s up to me to save myself.

Finding a good use for my stupid heels, I lift one and stomp on Topher’s foot.

“Only making this harder on yourself,” he growls, hauling me out of his dad’s hold.

My cheek slams into the wall. It’s warm and hard. I’m being contained by it.

I’d rather be outside in the rain that had started pouring seconds ago. Would sell my soul to be out there, soaked to the bone.

Hell, I’d risk getting hit by lightning.

Anything other than this.

“Topher,” James scolds. “Be careful.”

“Your owner won’t be as forgiving as we are,” Topher says while I thrash my body and scream for help.

James walks over to where I can see him. “The potential buyers are—”

“You’re a lawyer,” I shriek. “You’re normal people. Normal people! Enough with this auction bullshit!”

Without giving me an answer, James takes the cuffs from Topher and tosses them to the floor.

“Dad’s right. We don’t need these.” Topher’s sickening breath is on my cheek. My dinner threatens to expel itself once again. “I always wondered

what it’d be like to have you fight me. A girl from foster care. I bet you’re as wild as you claimed to be.”

“Stop it! This isn’t you!”

His dad’s eyes are full of rage. Of something more. Whatever it is, he’s quick to snuff it out. “Do you really think we’ve accumulated all this wealth throughout the years by running a law firm?”

It isn’t that far-fetched, is it? Hawthorne Morgan is the most prominent criminal law firm on the East Side. Their clients range from Mafia bosses to politicians to other wealthy bastards.

It makes sense. It—

Topher’s hand is a manacle on my nape.

“Stop. Fucking stop.” For reasons that are beyond me, his dad’s had enough. James’s hand curls around my wrist. He uses the other one to peel Topher’s off me.

“Dad, what are you doing?”

“I warned you. Ordered you to be careful.” When his cold stare lands on Topher, I shiver. “Since you failed to listen, I’ll take it from here. Go ahead, start walking.”

Topher scoffs, lingering next to us for another second.

Then he relents.

I would’ve done the same. James is terrifying. Another shiver runs through my body.

His son walks ahead and away from us.

However, I’m not so naïve as to think I’m in the clear. Danger is very much present.

James guides me across the expansive halls of the Hawthorne mansion.

Where hell awaits.

“Let. Me. Go,” I snarl at him.

“No.”

Topher waits for us, holding open a hidden door. Where are we? How did we get this far from the dining room?

“That other source of income, what is it exactly?” I keep my tone as conversational as possible.

Maybe, if I don’t fight, if I pretend to accept my situation, he’d get bored. Both of them.

I’m a great actress when I put my mind to it.

In high school, I'd gotten a couple of leads in our school's drama club. That was my ticket to college, how I landed my scholarship.

College. My chest caves at the memories. I should've never dropped out. I get that now.

Had I stayed, I wouldn't have been on that bench the day I met Topher. I would've been working on my master's or spending hours stuck in an office.

I wouldn't have had the afternoon off to read a book in Union Square and think about what the hell I was going to do with my life.

Topher, the psycho, wouldn't have noticed me. We would've never met.

He would have found another poor woman to prey upon.

Not the most selfless thought to have. Then again, I *am* being carried—respectfully, but still—by James. He's taking me somewhere where no one will hear me scream.

He remains silent throughout the entire demeaning walk to the hidden door Topher has left open. He says nothing as we descend the stairs. As we follow Topher through the medieval-looking hall beneath James's mansion.

Sconces line the walls along the way, but their light isn't warm. Not at all.

I'm shivering. Teeth clinking.

The heater works just fine.

My foreboding doom is what does that to me.

"Ow!" I stumble on one of the cracks in the stone floors. James steadies me against his hard body, the movement impersonal.

Topher whips his head around. "Dying won't help you, pretty one."

My skin crawls at the familiar nickname.

He has no right. No right at all.

"Go to hell."

"I have a few years until I get there. You, on the other hand—"

"Keep walking," James interrupts.

He's protecting me. Sort of.

I'll take it, that sliver of humanity.

I'll do better and use it to my advantage.

"Wait!"

Both men stop to stare at me.

"What, Ophelia?" My name, spoken by James.

I hate that my heart swoops.

Can’t stand the hope that latches onto me.

Throwing up would’ve been the more appropriate reaction.

Because he isn’t my knight in shining armor. He doesn’t care, that much is clear.

But he might come to his senses. He could save me if I played my cards right.

“She’s stalling.” Topher runs his knuckles over my cheek. James seethes. Fuckers. The two of them. “Let’s go.”

When tears brim in my eyes, I do my best to stay in the present moment. To survive this.

“Please.” I’m not above begging. Another step into this medieval-looking hallway and I’m done. “Please, I don’t have much to give you, but whatever I have, it’s yours. I won’t tell anyone, either. Let me go. Please.”

Silence.

My breath hitches when James pushes me forward.

“Please!”

More silence. He’s forcing me to walk a few more feet before we reach our final destination. Where he slips two antique gold keys out of his pocket.

“Please, James.” Last chance. I have to make it count. “Please. I’m begging you.”

My endless pleas have no effect on either of them.

“No.” My worst fears come true as James unlocks the door to a cell. An honest-to-God cell, like a jail cell. “No.” I yank my body left and right. He’s stronger. So much stronger. “Don’t—Please, please. I don’t want to die here. Please.”

No one answers me. I scream at the top of my lungs over and over. Throw my free hand up in an attempt to hit James.

Topher ignores my cries for help. James’s grip on my wrist tightens.

Tears roll down my cheeks. They land on my cleavage as I’m being escorted into this twenty-by-twenty cell.

Double bed. Two gray duvets. Metal toilet and sink with one cloth draped over it. This is what I have here, in this dreadful place.

“Please.” It’s humiliating to sob in front of these monsters. More so when I think one of them is attractive. No. No. I don’t. “Please, I won’t tell anyone. Let me go, and I’ll disappear. You don’t have to do this.”

Topher moves aside to let his dad slide the cell door shut. James does exactly that, locking it with a firm twist of his wrist.

“I get that you’re scared. But, for your sake, listen to me.” James rises to his full height behind the metal bars. “We are not going to kill you or torture you.”

When I launch at him, he clasps his hand around my wrist through the bars. Rubs his thumb along my pulse point. Makes a sound at the back of his throat.

And steps out of my reach. “We’re going to auction you off. Your virginity. Your body. Your freedom. None of those are yours anymore. They’re ours now. Tomorrow, a new person will be your owner. You’ll be theirs for life.”

Tremors pummel through my body. My teeth clink, but I still fight. Still stretch my hands out through the bars. All so I can maybe, *maybe* claw James’s eyes out. He’s the one closest to me. Topher, the coward, leans against the farthest wall.

“Calm down,” James says. His gorgeous eyes would look so good in my palm.

“No one’s going to own me,” I growl at them both. Topher stares at me blankly. As if I’m already gone. I return to James. “I don’t even have a boyfriend anymore. I came here as a last courtesy. I was going to dump him. So get me the fuck out of here and let me go home. I don’t belong to him. I don’t belong to anyone.”

If Topher cares about the things I’m shouting at him, he does a great job at hiding it. Not a peep comes out of him.

“Denial won’t do you any good.” James levels me with a dark gaze. “Go to bed. Rest. It will upset us if the bids aren’t high because you have dark circles under your eyes. And trust me, you don’t want us even mildly upset.”

“Motherfucker! Let me out of here!”

My screams are useless. My tears are seen by no one since both men leave me there.

By myself.

“I hate you!”

I’m all alone.

Caged like an animal.

At the mercy of monsters.

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3

JAMES

Two hours.

Two hours that Ophelia has been in her cell. Two hours that I've been watching her.

She'd spent the first one awake, pacing the floor. When she exhausted herself, she collapsed on the bed.

She's been asleep since.

I know all of that because I've been watching her the entire time since we left her there.

Well, not quite. Five minutes were spent climbing the stairs to the second floor with Topher. Three more went to getting rid of him by telling him to rest up before the big day.

When I lost him, I went into my room. Locked the door behind me. Took a seat on my leather armchair by the fireplace. My staff lit a fire there while others served our dinner.

Right before they went to their quarters in a separate house on my property as per my orders. They never asked why.

They knew what was coming.

Most of them have been working for me for years. My late father hired some of them. I kept them around. Mainly because they seemed as relieved as I was when their former boss had passed away.

They weren't relieved when Topher started bringing Ophelia over.

See, it isn't a secret. Our staff knows about our tradition. The Hawthornes' and Morgans' sick legacies.

In addition to the auction house, the men in our family established two traditions.

First, every man who turns twenty-one must auction off a virgin. Then, once she's out of the way, sold to the highest bidder, we go on the hunt for another woman to breed then dispose of.

Two despicable rites of passage that I've managed to fuck with over the years.

This year, they'll end for good.

Until then…

Nothing changes.

I'm still the cold, detached man I've always been.

Just like my dad and unlike Oliver, my business partner. He's into the building connections. Forming friendships. Being social in general.

He's too friendly, in my opinion, given how he can't keep his dick in his pants.

I, on the other hand, have no interest in fucking around.

My work. That's what I'm focused on. That's what makes me a great lawyer.

An even better puppet master.

I hate to admit it, but the auction house has played a part in my success. And while I don't step foot in the wretched place, I do make good use of the blackmailing material it provides.

It works because people fuck. They fuck a lot, and influential people are no different. We provide them with willing women who service them.

Then we take their pictures. Keep them as leverage for when a case can't be won fair and square.

Oh, they know about it. Everyone knows. They still come to us. They fill the auction house Oliver runs and I've steered away from.

I'll be there for the main event. The celebrated auction.

I'll play my part. Then I'm taking them down.

Sure, I pretend to be all in. But it'll be a farce. A façade I maintain even around Topher.

Lately, he's been too close to Oliver and his son, Camden. I haven't been able to trust him, despite my best efforts.

I give him the impression that I'm as invested as he is.

Tonight, he had a chance to prove to me that his heart was pure.

It was a test, and he failed.

He was needlessly cruel toward Ophelia. Aggressive. Violent. Excited to sell an innocent woman.

But I haven't given up hope. He's my son, after all.

As soon as he shows remorse, I'll spare him.

Oliver and Camden? Never.

My *friend* had his chance. I gave him an out, and let's just say, it didn't work out as planned.

Ever since, neither he nor I have trusted one another.

The Morgans are as good as dead.

Movement on my screen snaps me out of my daze. Ophelia's restless, twisting and turning in her bed.

The thought of another man or a woman like the Morgans having their hands on her…

Inconceivable.

My detailed plan will ensure it won't happen.

Her fate will be no different from that of the other sacrifices before her.

One of the men I hired specifically for this job will wait for her. A day or two after the auction, he'll kidnap her to an undisclosed location, give her the number to an offshore bank account.

He'll set her free.

And I'll never see or hear from her ever again.

Everything inside me rages against this decision, as final as it is.

That was the deal I made with myself even before I met her. Before I fell hard and motherfucking fast for Topher's girlfriend.

The flames crackle in my fireplace. Lightning slices through the black of the night. Thunder cracks somewhere nearby. Heavy rain lashes at the large windows.

Faintly, I hear the leaves and branches of the old oak trees surrounding our property rustling in the wind.

Me? I'm here. A glass of whiskey in my tattooed hand. My black dress shoe tapping on the expensive navy rug at my feet.

My skin warms from the fire. From watching her on the CCTV app on my phone. The one Topher has no idea exists.

I take a sip from my drink. It burns my throat as I swallow.

Twenty-one years and nine months. It's been that long since the last two virgin sacrifices were put up for auction.

Since two others were chosen to carry our sons right after the auction had taken place.

Since I managed to save Topher's mom from being raped. By me.

Since I ended up saving both of our sacrifices without anyone being the wiser.

Over two decades ago.

This isn't just any other virgin. Just any sacrifice. You know *Ophelia.*

Arthur Hawthorne, my father, would've belted me if he knew I felt even remotely attached to a woman. Any woman.

But he isn't here. He and Oliver's father moved—no, were forced—onto the next world. Even if they were still here, my father's opinion wouldn't have mattered.

I'm stronger than the kid I once was. More lethal.

Oliver is about to find out exactly how lethal I am, and soon.

But it's not Oliver I'm looking at right now.

She isn't yours.

Except I can't get her out of my head.

Doesn't matter. She. Isn't. Mine.

She is special, though.

Otherwise, I would've gotten bored with her tears.

Nothing about Ophelia bores me.

Not a damn thing.

Fucking inconvenient.

Infuriating, really.

Can't be helped, either.

She just had to go and crawl her way into my heart.

The first time Topher brought her over, I could tell she'd be different. It was glaringly obvious. To me, at least.

Topher, on the other hand, spoke about her as if she were a stray he had picked up off the street. As if she weren't a rare, precious diamond.

His blatant disrespect for her is another test he failed.

He could've come to me. Could've asked to put an end to this tradition. I never suggested he couldn't.

But then tonight, the way he handled her…

I did nothing like that at my initiation.

Even for the sake of pretense.

I take another sip of my drink, rolling it on my tongue as I reconsider.

Maybe he didn’t mean to be this cruel to her. Maybe he’s sulking because he can’t keep her.

Neither of us can. We aren’t allowed to marry or have a partner.

This is what our legacy is based on. No divorce. No distractions.

Men. Single men are all we’ll ever be.

My thumb rubs the screen where Ophelia sleeps. Sadly, my body doesn’t care for rules, legacies, or restrictions. My goddamn heart is a rogue motherfucker.

Ophelia is to blame for that. Has been to blame for that from day one.

At five feet two, my son’s girlfriend carried herself as if she were taller than both of us. Shoulders relaxed. Dark eyes facing me. Thick, black hair cascaded down her ramrod-straight back.

The black silk dress that enveloped her lean body didn’t look as old as I was sure it was. She pulled it off magnificently. Any designer would’ve begged her to model for them.

Her cheeks flushed, but she stared me down, regardless.

Her beauty was dark and not in a skin-deep kind of way.

Bone-deep.

With Topher’s hand on the small of her back—which had my jaw ticking and my fist clenched—Ophelia was ushered toward me. Her gait was confident, her heels barely making a sound on the wood floor.

Floating.

Our gazes locked.

“Dad.” Topher’s voice was distant. A murmur from another room. Universe, even. “This is my girlfriend, Ophelia Monroe.”

I outstretched my hand for her. Needed to touch her more than anything.

The one thing our families hadn’t allowed. You could fuck a woman, use a woman, then dispose of her.

Needing a woman had been forbidden. Going against it would’ve resulted in my death sentence.

I needed her anyway. It was the first time I had my eyes on her, in person, and I needed *her.*

She placed her hand in mine.

So small. Delicate. Soft.

“James Hawthorne. A pleasure to have you here, Miss Monroe.”

“Ophelia, please.”

A quick shake and a small smile from her. I pulled my hand back and never touched her again.

Until tonight. Until my hand was on her wrist. My cock strained my pants.

Then there was this craving for her. The fierce need that chipped at my sanity.

God, I can't ever think like that. About keeping her.

What an absurd idea. It's the third time tonight that I have to push it out of my head.

What for? I'm not built for a relationship. For love.

Warm, fuzzy emotions. None of that for me.

I want her.

No. No. What I'm feeling is obsession. It's been plaguing me for a month, and now that I have her here, it's more potent than ever.

It's never been like this while I've been stalking her over the last month. Outside her home. When she took the subway.

She's here. Finally mine.

For one night, I can have that.

Her.

Sonnet.

That's the name I gave her in my head as soon as I laid my eyes on her. Everything about her is pure poetry. Her full lips. The curve of her hips. Her soft voice.

Her screams.

Her tears.

I put my drink on the end table a little too hard. The glass clinks. The whiskey sloshes.

This possessiveness is dangerous. Unstoppable.

Fuck, would you look at her. She's adorable. Defenseless, curled up into a ball beneath the duvets.

I should leave her. Should set my phone down.

Should follow my own goddamn advice and rest before the main event tomorrow.

I laugh wryly into the empty room.

Like I'll ever be able to fall asleep with her down there.

I have to try. I log out of the CCTV app. Chug down the remainder of my whiskey then put it back on the table.

Then—because I'm definitely *not* going to her cell—I call Oliver. I should've done that earlier, but fuck him. Fuck this tradition.

"James. Took you long enough." Suspicion taints his voice. "I was expecting to hear from you hours ago."

He's smart to suspect me.

"Sorry, you're right. We were done with her hours ago."

"Then?"

My business partner tends to forget that I don't answer to him or anybody. "Are you done with yours?"

His heavy footsteps echo in the background. Oliver is bulkier than I am. The man walks like a fucking bear.

"Baylor. Yes." A door slams. More footsteps and a huff. I'm sure he's dropped into the gray loveseat in his bedroom in South Hampton. In the house overlooking the ocean. "This little blonde, I swear. Tears and mascara never looked so hot on anyone. She wept, James. Fucking wept. Got on her knees in the middle of the living room and begged. Told Camden she loved him. That she'd thought they were going to get married. A fucking eighteen-year-old begged him to be her husband. I can only hope she repeats this performance tomorrow."

Our buyers will eat that shit up.

Repulsive. All of them.

"She did?" I get up, strolling to the window. Looking outside at the howling rain.

"Yes."

He goes on and on. How they locked her up in a room in their attic. How she banged on the floor while they clinked their champagne flutes.

Reminds me of the stories he told me about his virgin. Only his dad beat him up every time she screamed.

I let him talk while I think.

I was going to dump him. I don't belong to him.

Camden's so-called girlfriend talked about marrying him. Ophelia was about to break up with my son.

She could have been lying. On the other hand…Topher did tell me she'd called him and said they needed to talk.

I press one hand on the window, feeling the vibrations of the harsh weather. Staring at my tattoo, a reminder of who we are and what we're doing.

A reminder of the establishment I'm going to take down.

Of the women I'm going to save.

Of Ophelia.

In the midst of Oliver's boasting, I decide that she wasn't lying about coming here to break up with Topher. She looked too fucking honest when she snarled it in my face. She really did mean to end their relationship.

A sense of sick satisfaction ripples through me. Makes my blood hot, and my balls tighten.

Why would she, though? Topher is handsome. Smart. On the path to success as a partner in our law firm. He didn't cheat on her. The man I have following him would've reported it back to me.

"The two layers of isolation we installed between the second floor and the attic proved their worth." Oliver chuckles in the background. "Pretty sure she would've broken through the wood panels of the original construction."

"Sounds like it." The rain pelts down outside, as incessant as my thoughts of the woman I hold captive. In the cell I built last year as a part of my plan to deceive the three other men.

"What about yours? Forgot her name." He chuckles, and I'm glad that he can't remember it.

She isn't his.

Isn't yours, either.

"Ophelia." My heart thuds loudly. My mouth waters as I taste her name on my tongue. I fake a yawn to mask my attraction to her. "Nothing special about her." *Liar*. "Like the rest of them. Cried. Begged. Bartered." Was about to claw my eyes out. Fucking hot. "Bored me to tears."

"You're joking." He sounds surprised. He believes me. "After over twenty-one years of waiting for this, you were bored." A pause. I stay quiet. Won't oversell it. "No wonder you didn't call. Fuck, what a disappointment. You sure you want to put this one up for auction tomorrow?"

No. Fuck no. But it's better for everyone involved that we get the show on the road as soon as possible. The faster we do, the faster I can end the women's suffering.

"Yes."

"The night isn't over, James." Knowing Oliver, he's running his hand through his brown hair. Over his jaw. Unlike me, he's always shaved. "I could unlock Baylor's phone, get you the addresses of some of her friends.

You and Topher could go on the hunt. Grab one from her home instead of—”

Before he can say her name, I cut in. “No. Topher chose her. I won’t meddle with his initiation.”

“So ask *him* to reconsider.”

“Remember my father?” The rain no longer holds my interest. This phone call is getting on my last nerve.

“Do I remember? Of course I do.” Oliver snorts. I wasn’t the only one to loathe Arthur Hawthorne. Oliver wasn’t the only one to despise Aaron Morgan. “The way he gave you hell for not torturing them until they cried. Fine, yeah. I get it. He meddled. You won’t. Keep the fucking girl. Let’s hope someone else won’t be as bored.”

“Different strokes for different folks and all that.”

“Yeah.”

Putting her up there is a necessary, temporary evil, but fuck.

It has my pulse spiking.

“Talk tomorrow.” I hang up without giving him a chance to answer.

Tomorrow, she’ll belong to the world.

After that, she’ll be hidden somewhere no one will find her.

Tomorrow.

Tonight, Ophelia is still mine.

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4

JAMES

At the sound of the lock flipping, Ophelia wakes up. She snaps into a sitting position, staring right at me.

Fuck me. She's a sight.

Wild hair. Wilder eyes.

Both duvets have dropped to her waist, showing the outline of her nipples through the thin fabric of her dress.

Curious.

It isn't particularly cold in her cell.

"James?" Her voice is hoarse from sleep. From crying.

Her suffering has my skin burning up. I'll never let it show.

"Yes." The duffel bag I've brought down here makes a loud *thunk* as it hits the floor.

Then I turn around and flip the lock on the cell's door.

When I look up at her, her brow furrows. Lips curling into a sneer.

I ready myself for the attack I know is coming in three…two…

"Motherfucker." Ophelia launches herself at me. She doesn't get very far.

The duvets drop to the floor as she stands up, tangling between her legs. She stumbles into my arms, still screaming profanities.

"Stay away!" Her fists go to my chest, punching against my white dress shirt. "Don't touch me!"

"Who's touching who?" As I steady her, I grab her shoulders harder than necessary. If this is the only chance I get to have her, I'll handle her as

rough as I like. “You’re the one who threw yourself into my arms.”

The dim light does nothing to hide the crimson on her cheeks. “Fuck you.”

“As appealing as the idea is,” I say it because it’s the truth. I also say it to terrify her. I could be kinder. Could pacify her. Tell her that, after tomorrow, she’ll be safe. But I’m a bastard. The fear in her eyes gets me hard as a rock. “I’m here for a completely different reason.”

“Oh God. Oh God. Let me go.” She’s relentless in her efforts to punch my chest. As much as this scenario entertains me, I warn her by digging my fingers deeper into her shoulders. “You’re not high anymore. You—you finally get it. You see how crazy this is now, but you can’t release me. That’s fine. You can. Mr. Hawthorne, please. I swear I won’t tell anyone.”

“I meant what I said earlier. We weren’t high, Ophelia.” *Sonnet*. The name won’t leave my lips. Not just yet. Maybe never. “You won’t die here. Tomorrow, you’ll be transferred to the auction house. From there, your buyer will take you to your new home. It’s an honor to be selected for this part. You shouldn’t be fighting me. You should be excited. Grateful. Tomorrow is a big day for you.”

Honored. Grateful. What a joke.

But she has to believe that I’m this person. This unhinged man who gets off on selling unwilling, innocent women like her.

I sure as fuck am not excited about this or her.

Nothing excites me anymore. I’m incapable of either happiness or love. That’s who I am. Born and raised to be a monster.

Her eyebrows scrunch. Her lips curve down. “What happens tomorrow?”

Poor thing. She heard me. She heard Topher.

We didn’t whisper or sugarcoat anything.

Yet she refuses to believe it.

Wish I could be in such a deep state of denial. Would’ve made my life much easier.

“The auction.”

A sob catches in her throat. She twists her head so I won’t see her agony.

I’m not having that. Tonight, her pain is mine. Every last bit of it.

With two fingers under her chin, I force her to look at me. Big, brown eyes burrow into mine. So fucking sad. So full of accusations.

And pleadings.

She squeezes them shut, and when she opens them, there's fire in them.

"Why are you here, then?" she snarls, finally hearing the truth for what it is. She doesn't fight me, though. I'm bigger. Stronger. She understands she's lost the fight. What a precious feeling to evoke in her. "To mock me for falling for your son and ending up here? Well, fuck you. I don't love him. I had a crush on him. That shit lasted, what? Two months tops."

I shouldn't search for proof that she really, truly is over him.

It's infuriating that I do. My jaw tics as I stay absolutely silent. Waiting for her to fill the silence with more of her ramblings.

"I kept waiting for him to be something other than this…nothing." Her lips pinch. Yeah, she isn't into him. She resents him. "So, guess what?"

Caring about her feelings and their history is pointless. Come tomorrow, she'll be gone.

I'm wasting precious time by listening to her. Time I could spend touching her. Humiliating her. Violating her without fucking her.

Doing everything in my power to get her out of my system.

I ask anyway, "What?"

"More of nothing."

Her admission does things to me. Things I won't entertain, not even in my own head.

Ophelia saves me from having to think about it a second later by stomping my foot. The soft contact of her bare foot hardly registers.

She growls at my stony expression.

"I didn't love him. Do you hear?" I'm getting harder and harder with each word. It's wrong to like it, how there was nothing between them. "I couldn't. So if you're here to mock me for being a silly little girl who didn't see the signs, you can turn around and fuck right off. My only mistake was showing him kindness by agreeing to this one last dinner."

She stops talking, and I…

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

This isn't an emotion that makes me pull her as close as I can.

These are my most basic instincts that make me thread my fingers through her hair. They're the reason why I tug on her lush strands until she's looking up at me.

I'm a conqueror. I *take*. That's what I do.

There's nothing behind this primal act other than taking her.

Ophelia’s lips are far, though. She’s so goddamn far and I have to taste her. To press mine to her forbidden ones.

I slide my hands to the sides of her neck.

I lean into her.

And I kiss her.

She tastes like sin. She’s the reason I haven’t kissed another woman in years.

Having to be gentle is eating me alive. Keeping from biting on her plump bottom lip and making her bleed for me has my temples throbbing. The buyers can’t see that another man has had her.

Even if that man is me.

But—yes, there are other things I can do to her. Like coax her mouth open, despite how tight she shuts it.

There’s no saving herself from me.

I groan, and the sound is foreign to my ears. It doesn’t belong to the controlled man I am. The calculated one.

He’s gone now.

Kissing her has fucked with my psyche. For these few minutes that I swipe my tongue along hers and pull her closer—while she resists me—the civilized man in me checks out.

A beast has taken his place. I suck in her air, lick her, tilt her head to get deeper into her mouth. I squeeze her neck when she moans, when she groans and slams one hand to my chest.

Ever since I was born, my heart has been locked behind walls. Barricaded inside my chest. No one can get in here, not even my son.

I don’t *love*. I don’t *care*.

I might be responsible for some people, but that’s where it ends.

I don’t desire anything other than power.

A flash of irritation stabs at my gut. It resents the lie.

I desire *her*. Her lips. Her tongue. Her screams.

Her submission. She gives it to me, unable to resist the urge to please me once I’ve got her right where I want her. After I slide both hands into her hair.

Ophelia eases into me.

She kisses me back.

And that’s so good. Too good.

Hints of red wine and steak and *her* blend into my mouth.

Closed eyes and long lashes on rosy cheeks are everything I see.

Soft hair and a silk dress are all I feel as I slip my hand over her hip, pinning her body more tightly against mine.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

Fuck. What the hell am I doing?

She's not mine. Never will be.

She sure as fuck isn't supposed to enjoy this.

I wrench myself from her, scowling as I step back.

The pain of losing her warmth is uncanny, yet necessary.

"James." Her rough, breathless voice is going to ruin me. It's as if she's still kissing me.

She won't win. I take another step away from her, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

Her taste remains on my tongue. Highly unlikely that it'll ever go away.

"James. Please." Ophelia comes closer.

Her expression is torn. Eyebrows lowered. Forehead scrunched.

Her swollen lips part as though she were going to say something.

I have no use for her words. I see what's going on in her head; I see it perfectly clear.

She hates what we've done as much as I do.

We both resent how much we liked it.

"Please." Her chest expands. Is she breathing in hope? She fucking shouldn't. "We can leave here. We can have that, this, somewhere else. You and I."

She's too close. Ophelia raises her hand.

She absolutely shouldn't.

In a moment, her fingers will brush the skin of my jaw.

I slap it away.

She tries again. I'm done fucking around, catching her wrist like the bastard that I am.

We stare at each other, fire burning in our eyes.

A million miles between us won't lessen my need for her, it seems like. The realization is a blow to the chest.

It's a rude wake-up call.

Because after tonight, I'll have to let her go. For the sake of the plan.

For her sake.

I won't risk her life because she fucks so goddamn well with my head.

A line has to be drawn between us.

My hand around her wrist feels dangerous. Like I might snap it.

I fucking might. Break her to pieces just to put her back together again.

No.

“Lose your clothes.”

“James, if this is about Topher.” I’m curious, so I listen. Fuck me, I listen. “He’s a good man, deep down. Your only son. I get that you want to please him, but surely, he doesn’t want to do this, right?” Her free hand gestures at the cell. “Not really. Or he might, but you could talk him out of it.”

“Was I unclear, Sonnet?”

“Sonnet?”

“I said.” Ignoring the slipup, I stalk forward, forcing her back until the backs of her legs hit the bed. My lips are inches from hers, my eyes watching the terror in hers. My hand wraps around her throat. “Lose. Your. Clothes.”

“Why?” Courage flashes across her face. Anger.

She’s a bold little one.

I won’t have it, won’t lose my edge, no matter how hot she is.

Time to instill fear in her. Show her I’m not playing.

“Topher said you were a virgin.”

She gasps. Goosebumps race up her delicate arm. Her pulse hammers beneath my thumb.

“Unfortunately for you, I can’t take his word for it.”

Her pupils are enormous. She’s stopped blinking.

“I’m going to have to see for myself.”

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5

OPHELIA

Hope. The cursed emotion bled into my fear and desperation when James kissed me.

His lips moved in such a sensual way against mine. The swipe of his tongue was a promise. His hands an anchor.

You're mine.

He didn't say it. Didn't have to.

Possessiveness bled from his every move. The way he held me. Handled me. Coaxed my lips open.

James Hawthorne wasn't Topher's cold and distant father in those moments. Not the mysterious, older man I'd met over dinners.

My jailer was gone.

There was only violence. Ownership. A savior who'd take me away from this hell I'd been thrown into.

I hoped so.

I let myself submit to this hope.

Worse still. I let myself believe it.

Foolish. I'm so foolish I could cry.

There's no savior here, in this cell.

There's cruelty. Now that he's done kissing me, I see it for what it is.

His expression is set in stone.

Cruel eyes. Vicious grip.

It feels like I’m staring at him through the looking glass. Ice slices down my spine, and I shiver. I hate that I do. I hate that his lips twist into a fleeting smirk.

“See for yourself?” I say when the silence becomes intolerable.

I’m still in the process of waking up. Still trying to understand what’s happening.

One second, I’m a free woman sitting at the last dinner with her boyfriend and his dad. The next, I’m bombarded with information I never asked for while being locked behind bars.

“Yes.”

These things he’s saying—there’s no way I’m hearing them. This whole night has to be a dream. A nightmare. I’m hallucinating this, I have to be.

But since he isn’t moving or offering up any other explanation, I have to ask, “See for yourself if I’m really a virgin?”

“Yes. Lying to our buyers would ruin our reputation.”

This word again. Buyers. I could scream. I could kill him.

I can’t do either, so I spit on his face. “Fuck you. You’re not checking me for fucking nothing. You won’t get away with this.”

James lifts his hand, slowly wiping my saliva off his nose and his mouth. And then—then, holy shit—he licks his tattooed hand clean. While staring down at me.

My traitorous body. Heat pools at my core, and my knees threaten to buckle. I won’t let them. I’ll fight it until the day I die.

“We have.” With little to no effort, he spins me around. I scream while he bends me over and pushes my head onto the bed. “For decades.”

The sheets are dark gray and smell like me. I’ve been here for that long. I don’t want to spend another second here.

Panic clutches at my lungs. “Let me go!”

James’s hand pins my wrists to my back. I hear a bag dragging across the floor. A quick glance tells me I heard right.

It’s the bag he brought here.

“Sage will call the authorities,” I warn. I wriggle. I stomp on his foot again. Nothing deters the big James Hawthorne, who unzips his duffel casually. “She’ll file a missing person’s report. Topher is—was—my boyfriend. He’s the first person they’ll come for.”

“Sage Wright knows what’s best for her, and that’s keeping her mouth shut.”

Is that why she’s been slumming it with me? She’s been hiding from people like James?

She told me she’s trying to rebel against her mom.

She’s just another person who’s been lying to me.

“She’ll file a missing person’s report,” I try a second time.

James’s hand gives my wrists a threatening squeeze. “She’ll never go up against us.”

“Why?” Fear pushes against my ribs. It forces another shiver through my body. Another wave of heat between my thighs.

I’m so sick. So fucked in the head for being turned on by this monster.

This man, who presses his legs to the backs of my thighs while he bends to get something from his bag.

A flash of plastic in my periphery—zip ties. When Topher dangled the cuffs in my face, I almost threw up. Watching James’s large hand gripping the zip ties has the opposite effect on me.

I’m hot all over. I’m breathing fast. I’m humiliated.

Conflicted.

I wish he’d hike my dress up and relieve me of this pressure in my pussy so I can think again.

I wish with everything in me that he won’t. As soon as he sees the dark spot on my cotton panties, he’ll know. There’ll be no hiding my shameful need for him.

“Stop touching me, you monster.” Stomping on him is useless, but I won’t stop. He doesn’t even acknowledge me. “Don’t you dare tie me up. I don’t give a fuck what you say, Sage will go to the authorities.”

James goes on, closing the zip ties around my wrists. His touch is rough, yet he doesn’t hurt me.

I loathe him for it.

If he would hurt me, I could truly despise him like he deserves.

“Hmm. Let’s just say…” My shoulders strain when he lifts my hands. He isn’t pulling on them or anything; it’s me who fights and thrashes. “Stop fidgeting, Sonnet.”

“I’m not a sonnet! Let me go!”

He places a hand between my shoulder blades. “You’ll only end up hurting yourself.”

I refuse to hear the gentleness slipping into his tone. He’s an evil man, a sadistic, delusional psycho. That’s it. I have to stick to that.

I stop resisting him. For the slim chance of ever making it out alive, I need to have my shoulders intact.

“Good girl.”

“Shut up, asshole,” is all I say.

If I weren’t trapped in his hold, I’d run to the nearest wall and slam my forehead against it, again and again, until my brain spilled out. Maybe then, James would finally be gone from my head.

After that, I’d tear open my own chest and rip him out of there too.

That’s how badly I want him out of me. His praise that my pathetic soul clings to. The effect he has on me.

I need to purge him from every part of me.

But I can’t do any of it.

A watery sigh escapes me once the zip ties are finally locked around my wrists, as tight as possible without harming me.

I blink the tears back as best I can. I have to listen to him. The more he talks, the more I have a chance of figuring out exactly what I’m dealing with. How to fight it.

“Sage’s uncle”—she has one, I remember she told me about the esteemed member of the city council—“has dirty secrets caught on camera. We have them.”

My stomach dips when I realize he isn’t lying.

When I connect the dots.

She knew who I was dating all along.

She warned me off Topher in a cryptic manner.

You deserve better, Ophelia.

Don’t settle for someone who doesn’t give you any less than his everything.

There are better men out there. Lots of fish, you know? You could do so much better.

Leave him. Leave him. Leave him.

She tried as best she could.

And I didn’t listen.

“Not to mention…” James’s lips are on my cheek. Hot and alluring.

A monster’s lips.

“Not to mention what?” Another kiss from him, and I’ll lose this battle. I have to keep him talking. Have to keep my sanity intact. “What, you sick fuck?”

His dark chuckle pushes the air out of my lungs. Heat creeps up my neck. Damn it.

“We’re in business with every person who counts in this country. The government. The Feds. The local authorities. The Mafia.” Such conviction in every word. Such vehemence is his hushed voice. “No one wants our operations to stop. Do you understand what I’m saying to you?”

He’s serious. He and Topher weren’t drunk or high or playing a sick roleplay game.

They’re human traffickers.

“You kidnap women?” I’m breathless. My blood runs cold in my veins. “Kidnap and sell them?”

“Not always.” He grinds his hips into me. James is hard. Huge. Hot for me, despite the cold façade he maintains so well. “The rest of the time, we auction off women who come to us.”

Another roll of his hips and a moan nearly breaks out of me. Fuck, it was a close one. Fuck, he feels good.

“Most of them offer themselves to the highest bidder for an hour or a day. A month. Sometimes a year.” Pulling on my hair, he flips me and manhandles me until my head is on the pillow. His forearms bracket my face. His eyes terrify me. “We have an organization that handles the auctions and the girls. People who follow them. Watch over them. Record their…interactions.”

“*I’m* not here willingly.”

The pressure on my wrists has been lifted. While I’ve been lost in his explanations and my fear, James has slipped a pillow underneath my back.

“The…virgin sacrifices…never are.” There’s something he’s hiding from me, I can tell. Problem is, I can’t bring myself to care right now. To ask him to elaborate “They serve a purpose. Once the Hawthorne and Morgan’s sons turn twenty-one, the ritual starts with the virgins.” His thumb brushes the hair that’s stuck to my cheek, his gaze never leaving mine. “Luring them, tricking them, then auctioning them. Those steps are a part of the rite of passage for the men in our families. A show of commitment to the cause. It reminds us of who we are. What we do. That’s what makes the sacrifices so valuable in the eyes of our buyers. That’s why they sell for millions.”

Sick. Everything about this is absolutely fucking sick. What’s sicker still is that I’m not scared.

Nothing about James screams impatience or murder.

His voice is cool and calm. Lips relaxed. Forehead smooth. My questions don't bother him. He's offering me explanations when I'm just a piece of property to him. An artifact to put up for sale.

Liar.

This has to be another trick.

"And you're telling me this, why?" I try to wriggle out of the zip ties.

The movement lands me a harsh glare, and it gets me nowhere. The plastic isn't cutting into my skin, but there's no way I'm getting out of it.

"Tomorrow night, you and another girl will be standing on a stage. A man or a woman will take you home later. You'll be theirs for life."

His hand slides to my throat. Another manacle. Another soft touch to keep the merchandise intact.

"Fuck you." The reality of my situation settles in. I'm terrified. Even my voice doesn't sound like mine. "Fuck you for doing this to me."

"You have to be prepared. For your own good." His glare is harsher now. The hint of compassion in it has withered and died. "Screaming and crying on stage will attract the wrong type of buyer."

"You said you watch over the girls," I whisper.

"Not the virgins." A storm gathers in his eyes. "In case one of the men in our families grows attached and tries to get them back. Which, for the record, never happens."

Everything about him is harsher all of a sudden. Rougher.

The idea of getting attached angers him.

"You might grow attached to me." Down there, somewhere, he has a heart. I've watched glimpses of it. That's the man I'm reaching out to. I hope he hears me.

"It's better that you let me go. I'll disappear. Promise." *Not before I burn this place down and hopefully save the other woman*. "Please, James. I-I'm begging you."

"It's cute." He lifts himself, his suit jacket stretching over his lean arms. "How you think I'm here to bargain. You hear the things I'm telling you. Still, you refuse to listen."

"You're going to put me up for auction," I repeat Topher's words from what seems like a lifetime ago, staring into James's eyes. Imploring the small, decent side of him to help me. "You don't have to. If Topher is asleep, you can help me sneak out."

An emotion I haven’t seen on him before splits his impenetrable expression. A splash of color on a blank canvas. Something violent that James has no control over for all of a second.

“You understand the first part. That’s good. Really good.” My chin is in his grip. “That leaves us with the second part. Why am I here?”

Terror and panic rush through me, causing my heart to pound faster. Cold sweat beads form on my forehead. But James isn’t the only coldhearted bastard in this room.

My past forged a bad bitch out of me.

New girl, this is my bed. Get the fuck off.

Ophelia fucking Monroe, why isn’t my plate sparkling? I told you to wash the dishes, didn’t I?

Not all my foster siblings and parents were bad. Most of them were awesome.

Then there were the few that jerked me around. Treated me poorly. I learned to talk back then. Lift my chin and say *Fuck you, this bed is mine*. Or, *I did my best, stop being an asshole to me*. To hit back.

I call for the strength I know I have inside me and face him. “Because you get off on torturing me.”

He leans in closer. Every nerve ending in my body sparks when his lips brush mine.

I’m hyperventilating, and there’s nothing I can do about it. Nothing but pinch my lips shut and hope he doesn’t notice my rapid breaths.

A light sparks in his eyes. He does.

Shit. Of course he notices.

“I get off on torturing you, yes. That, and then some.”

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6

OPHELIA

James releases my chin. Warmth erupts on my forearm when he brushes his fingers over it.

The same, deceptive warmth spreads out to my back when James pushes his hand between me and my tied hands, splaying it over my back.

“What else?” I fix my eyes on his, not daring to avert my gaze.

This conversation, his touch, they might be other tricks to distract me. Who knows what he might do if I look away.

He levels me with a look. I remember what he mentioned earlier. No. No.

“It can’t be—”

“Yes, it can. Your virginity.” From my back, he trails his hand up to my belly, flattening it possessively over my stomach.

His cold eyes turn fiery hot when he points his fingers south.

I’ve lost control over my breaths altogether. I’m panting. Breathing in the scent of his cologne.

“You’re not a doctor.” Deep inhale. It’s almost impossible with how he’s touching me. Looking at me. “Are you?”

James makes a satisfied sound in the back of his throat.

“No, I’m not.” The material of my dress is being scrunched a little higher. Cool air brushes against my thighs. “I do, however, know how to check if your hymen is intact. Our lineage doesn’t leave anything to chance. That includes this exam.”

Imagining James performing an exam like that on me is humiliating enough. To have Topher repeat it in front of the buyers will ruin me altogether.

"Get away from me!" I scream, my lungs burning. "I don't want anyone to touch me. Leave me alone, you sick motherfucker."

"*Used* to include this exam." His stony expression. His dark eyes. This man is out of his mind. "In past tense."

Then he growls. The sound is territorial. Animalistic. As if he's had a hand in ending this barbaric, decades-long show.

As if he won't let Topher check me, no matter what.

While I wonder what the hell is going on, he hikes the rest of my dress up to my waist.

I gasp. He hums. "Oliver, Camden's father—"

The other name partner in their law firm and Topher's dad's best friend. They're in on it too. The other virgin must be Baylor. Topher showed me their photos once. When I asked when I could meet them, his answer had always been *soon*.

Yet again, another reason why I started losing interest.

I wasn't a dirty little secret.

Stupid me, I thought he didn't want me to meet his friends because I didn't come from a wealthy background.

That the only reason he took me to meet his dad was that the latter had insisted on seeing for himself just how poor the woman he was dating was. If she—me—was a gold digger.

He had me questioning my self-worth so bad when in reality, Topher never cared about how much money I had in my bank account.

The fact that I was basically alone in this world was what made me the perfect target. For him. For his buyers.

A lonely woman, desperate for love. A virgin to keep out of anyone's reach until the initiation. Until they sold her to another shark.

A monster who'd gladly sink his teeth into this untouched piece of flesh.

"—and I, we made a joint decision to terminate this barbaric part of our ritual. The men in our family shouldn't be handling this aspect of initiation. This role is better suited to a doctor. But since an outsider can't be trusted, the check-ups will be performed on stage, not behind closed doors." He goes on peacefully—while chaos detonates inside my head. Bombs go off. Limbs fly. Total destruction. "This, what I'm doing here, goes against our

decision. I shouldn’t be performing this check-up myself. But you...you intrigue me.”

The sparks. The attraction. The pull. He’s felt it just as much as I have.

It does nothing to comfort me.

Nothing at all, since his fingers stroke my pussy over my panties.

Being drawn to him means shit. He won’t save me. He’s a monster.

I clench my thighs, refusing to give him access to my body. I won’t.

Maybe I could save myself. At least from this. Earn myself a few quiet hours before my life takes on another terrible turn.

“I’m a virgin. I swear.” The last word is half-moan as he shoves my panties to the side. He spreads my lips, presses his fingertip to my clit, and I react, damn it. My back arches, my eyes fly open. He dips a finger in my pussy, then rubs my wetness over my clit. God. Fuck. “I swear I am. You don’t have to do this. You don’t…Please.”

Tears line my eyes. I’m just as sick as he is to get off on this. On the attention he’s giving me.

At this very moment, I’m the only person in his world. It’s as thrilling as it’s nauseating.

I want him off me.

“I don’t have to do anything, Sonnet.” This name again. I have no idea why he chose it. Nothing about being tied up and caged is poem-worthy. Nothing flowery or romantic about a degraded, captive woman. “I want to, and you’ll let me. Topher swore you were a good girl, so show me. Open your legs and let me have a look at you.”

This is beyond obscene. Humiliation doesn’t begin to describe it.

This is my dignity being ripped to shreds.

I try to throw my head up, bash my forehead against his. He’s faster and has the instincts of a predator, avoiding me before any contact is made.

“Be a good girl.” He grips my chin. “You might even enjoy it.”

“Never.” Both he and I know it’s a lie. I’ll like it, despite myself. Without my consent, I’ll like it. “I’ll never enjoy anything you do to me, asshole.”

“We’ll see about that.” He moves down my body, reaching for the bag on the floor.

Self-loathing burns my eyes. My cheeks. My heart. Watching him pull out a speculum and a small flashlight wakes things inside me. Dark cravings. Darker desires.

Tears escape my eyes. All of them at once, I think. They roll down my temples, soaking my hair.

Still, I see him clearly. The inside of his palm, there's an old scar slashed onto it. A white line. It's out of my line of sight when he grabs another tool, placing it on the bed.

"Shh." James pets my thighs like I'm a wild animal. "I'm going to touch you. Going to look at you. You're going to let me."

He's said that before. This…request.

Only it isn't a real request. Not at all.

"Do I even have a choice?"

"No."

When he hooks his fingers into my panties and drags them down my hips, I don't kick him as I should. I cry harder.

It's mortifying, this unstoppable desire for him. My nipples are pulled into tight peaks. My pussy is hot and wet.

The craving in my soul hurts the most.

"Please." I squeeze my thighs, staring at him through the rivers of tears. "Please, don't. Call a doctor. Have them look at me. I'll let them. But you, don't do it. Please."

"You tempt me, Ophelia." James pries my legs apart. Just like that, with his warm hands that get me wetter and needier. "The way you beg so prettily. How you crave this."

"No. No, no, no." More lies. I shake my head anyway. "Please. I don't want this."

"You're such a liar." The flashlight and speculum are in his hands while he kneels before me. "I won't punish you for it, though I should. No. I have my methods to get you to tell me the truth."

"Methods?"

"Methods, yes." He hovers over my pussy, gripping the speculum in his left hand. Without so much as a warning, he spreads my lips with his right one and spits on my clit. "Stay put." His icy glare is back on my face. "Can't have you hurting the merchandise."

"Please, please, oh— Fuck," I groan when his thumb circles my clit. When he presses it hard until the pain turns into pleasure. "Stop. Stop, please."

No man has ever touched me there. No one. This is the wrong man to do it. The right one. *Jesus*. He's so fucking right for it.

“Good girl.” His thumb is still on my clit, rubbing while he bends lower. “Good little sacrifice, spreading your legs for me. Staying where you are so I won’t damage your perfect, pretty cunt.”

There it is. The cold metal of the speculum pressing against my walls. The pressure of it. The humiliation. It’s not painful. The invasion is not unwelcome. It only makes my heart bleed harder.

I can’t afford to break down in front of him again.

No more crying, then. None of it. I pinch my eyes shut as James pulls out the speculum and runs it up and down my slit, getting it wet.

As the tears slow, I breathe easier. “I hate you.”

“There you go. That’s my good girl.” His hands are on my pussy, eyes burrowing into mine. “I promised you you’d like it.”

“You’re delusional.” He’s not. Heat coils in my belly, and I’m powerless to stop it.

“And you’re enjoying this.”

My clit throbs even when James is no longer touching me. It’s hard not to be desperate for him when I can see his thick cock stretching his pants. The outline is mouthwatering.

I’m fucked. So fucked.

He brings the flashlight up, his head cocked. He’s considering something, and then he doesn’t, throwing the flashlight as hard as he can at the wall on the other side of the room.

I jump from the loud noise it makes as it crashes against it.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Won’t be needing that.” His voice transforms into something visceral. Raw and rugged. He has no control over himself, or maybe he does. Maybe this is the side of him that nobody else has ever met before. “Wherever you are. Whatever you do. Light. Dark. Doesn’t matter. I see you just fucking fine. Always will.”

A million thoughts and feelings burst inside me. Desire. Hope. Fear. They need exploring. They need tending to.

There’s no time.

“Now, relax for me.” James lowers again, nudging the speculum into my opening. I should clamp up. I don’t. I listen to him, not because I’m scared. I want to. Shame locks my throat. “Fuck, I could tell you’re good.” His gaze is on my pussy as he slides the metal device in carefully. “Feisty little one.”

How fucking obscene it is that he’s talking to me while starting what should be a gynecologist check-up.

How arousing.

Even more arousing when he starts rubbing my clit again. I moan for him. Dig my heels into the mattress and claw my nails into the pillow beneath me.

“I hate you so much.”

“Yes, you do. Dirty, good fucking girl.” He rubs me faster. The speculum, though, he holds it in place. Opens it by pressing the handle and the thumb hinge together. “Let’s take a closer look at you.”

The expansion hurts until pleasure warms me from head to toe. My head thrashes back, my mouth gaping. Guttural moans escape past my lips as soon as James’s hot breath licks the inside of my thigh. He bites it, sinking his teeth in for one torturous second.

“You have a beautiful pussy. Squeezing the speculum like that. You’re dying to have my cock inside you.” He’s merciless, pinching my clit and tugging. I scream. “Shh. It’s okay. Let it out. You can tell me how much you need to be fucked. How having me down here, looking at you, turns you on.”

“Never.”

By now, I know Topher wouldn’t come down here. James must have made sure he was asleep. Locked the door to the basement so no one would hear me.

I’m not sad about it. Or scared. I don’t need saving.

Tomorrow, I will.

The sick woman I am tonight, I don’t need anyone other than James here.

The man I’m attracted to. The man I want to kill.

“Your pathetic son,” I spit out. James remains in place. Doesn’t so much as look up at me. “He wouldn’t fuck me, and you know what? I bet it has nothing to do with your stupid auction. I bet he’s useless in bed. Both of you.”

“Oh, yeah?” He applies more pressure on my clit. Circles it. Flicks it. The pleasure is too much. Too fucking much. “Be explicit. Tell me why you don’t want my son. Tell me why you want me instead.”

“I don’t want either of you—Oh God. Oh, Jesus.” I lose it as he closes the blades of the speculum. As he drags it in and out of my opening. His

eyes are on me. Cold as the darkest night. “Either of you.”

I bite my bottom lip, glaring at the man who insists on commanding pleasure out of me.

“You’re hot when you lie.” The tip of the speculum rubs my walls, and that’s it. This is how I lose my mind from a gentle, obscene touch. “But when you come, you won’t be able to anymore. You’ll never be able to hide from me.”

“I’ll never see you again, you psycho fucker.” I wish I could. No, no. I can’t fucking wish that. “Ever.”

“Shut up,” he thunders, shaking me down to my core. “Admit it. You want me.”

“What difference does it make?” The tingling of my oncoming climax has my vision darkening around the edges. “You s-s-said it yourself. Someone else will buy me.”

“I also said”—tilting the speculum, he teases me at a new angle and I cry out—“shut up. You don’t need to talk. You need to come, Ophelia.” He pulls the speculum out of me, flinging it across the room. Replacing it with his fingers, to my horror. “Come all over my hand. I won’t ask you twice.”

I whimper. My back arches higher off the pillow. My thighs tremble.

I’m the most embarrassed I’ve ever been, riding his hand like that. Rocking my hips as he teases my entrance and flicks his thumb on my clit.

“Oh.” My mouth opens in a silent scream. “Oh God.”

“Eyes on me.” At his hushed, deadly order, I snap my eyes to his.

He’s beautiful. Terrifying.

James lowers his mouth to my clit. He licks. Sucks.

James ruins me.

“Fuck.” I finally stop caring, breaking into pieces for him.

His name is a prayer on my lips as my orgasm ripples through me. He helps me ride it out, rubbing and stroking. Calling me his good girl. His good slut. It’s the longest orgasm of my life. I’m not sure I’ll ever come down from this.

Eventually, I do. My pulse evens out, and my lungs don’t feel too big for my body.

Reality sets in. An ominous, heavy curtain that reminds me exactly where I am.

In my worst nightmare. With my captor.

Who dips his wet fingers into his mouth and sucks. I'm too exhausted from my orgasm and this long night to be humiliated. I know I ought to. It's wrong to want to embed that decadent image in my head. This wanting is all I've got at the moment.

"You have the sweetest pussy." He climbs out of bed, still rock-hard in his pants.

"Go to hell."

His lips part. He's about to say something.

He won't.

His mouth closes, and he goes over to the sink, grabbing the cloth hanging there. The water runs as he soaks it. His footsteps echo in the quiet cell as he returns to sit on the edge of my bed.

"Why can't *you* buy me?" Better the devil I know. He might even like me. I could break out of here when he's at work or sleeping. "You have plenty of money. Plenty of power and influence in the city. You could keep me here."

Thick eyebrows slam down, a silent *shut up* order. I have never witnessed a scowl taking over a person's face so fast.

"No." The cloth is warm on my bare thighs. A lover would wipe me clean this gently, I imagine. A lover, or my ex-boyfriend's psycho dad who used me up and now needs to put me back together. "I got what I came here for. You're a virgin. Our buyers won't be disappointed."

The humiliation is overwhelming. Clouding my vision. Flattening my lungs.

I will not cry. I will not.

James puts my dress back to rights. He flips me to my side and cuts off the zip ties. Brushes my wrists and murmurs to himself, "Good, no bruising."

Not a tear slips out when he pulls the duvets over me. When his palm closes on my arm and his lips brush my cheek.

Even when he says in a voice that drips of poison, "Goodnight, Sonnet," I hold them at bay.

It's when the lock clicks and his footsteps are silenced that I let them out.

That's when I cry and cry and cry.

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7

OPHELIA

I'm being watched.

Not by the three women who currently fret around me. They don't *watch* me. They assess my naked body, whispering to each other things like *wax* and *body lotion* and *that will do*.

This isn't them.

They're just there. Just three people I've been ignoring ever since they stepped into my cell this morning.

After last night's mind-fuck, retreating into myself is effortless.

The shame. The belittling. James's soft touch at the end of it.

I wish I could disappear.

Instead, I disassociate.

I pretend this expansive space I've been escorted to is the restaurant where I work. Sure, it's darker than *Laurier's*. There are no windows down here. No natural light filters into the brightly lit room.

Why would it?

I'm still underground, right down the hall from my cell.

The reminder has my stomach roiling. There's only so much pretending I can do under these circumstances. While I'm being discussed as if I'm not here. After James did a check-up on me, as if I were his cattle. After he forced me to come.

Not to mention that I'm still being watched by someone I can't see.

Slowly, it's becoming impossible to stay in that place in my head, where I'm the observer, the onlooker.

Maybe because I’m the one on the menu.

The three women in black maid outfits continue their chatter. I recognize them. Each one of them was present at least once during the meals I had here.

Maisie, the brunette and shortest of the three, hasn’t fixed her blue gaze on my face throughout the entire time we’ve been here.

Clara, also a brunette but taller, about my height, has had her sharp brown eyes assessing every inch of my skin. She’s in charge of *fixing me up*, it seems. She circles me, bending me over and huffing at my messy hair.

Then there’s Poppy. Her blonde hair is twisted into a low bun at the nape of her neck, just like the other two women. She’s the youngest of the three and doesn’t say a word, simply nods at whatever the other two comment on.

I could kick them. Swing a few punches. Pull their hair. They don’t look like trained assassins or anything. I’d take them down if I put everything into it. I want to. I would’ve too.

But then I’d have to deal with the locked door. Where two guards await. They’d knock me out if I even made it that far.

It hurts my bones, this waiting game.

I have no other option. I have to let them do their thing.

Their *job*.

While I stand there, feeling like a Foie Gras or Spaghetti Carbonara.

Before nausea has me doubling over, that intense sensation of being watched returns.

Goosebumps prickle my skin. Yesterday, I felt that while I sobbed in the cell. In the moments before sleep dragged me under.

Once James returned to the cell, the feeling stopped.

It’s back again now. More prominent, if possible. The longer I stand here, the chill goes deeper. Freezes my bones. Makes my teeth gnash.

“Don’t grind them.” Clara grabs my chin. Her gloved hand is soft, her voice scolding. “You’ll chip your teeth. They’ll be angry. You don’t want that.”

“Oh, really?” Though I’m talking to her, my eyes scan the room. Searching the walls. The ceiling. The air vents.

There has to be a camera somewhere here. There had to be one in my cell.

James is watching. Has to be him.

He can save you, a voice whispers in my head.

Maybe. As cruel and psychotic as he is, he's my best chance. If I have to let him do things to me to get out of here, then so be it.

I'm attracted to him, meaning I could survive this. I could use my virgin pussy or whatever to save myself and get the hell away from all of them.

"Really, what?" Clara asks.

I fix my eyes back on her. Narrow them. "So now what I want matters?"

"You want to live, don't you?" Her brown gaze is severe. The other two are behind her, heads bowed, hands folded in front of them.

"I'm too valuable for them to kill me." I'm naked. Breasts, pussy, and ass on display. Doesn't make me any less human. I deserve to be treated as one. "Fuck you. Fuck them. I'll grind my teeth into dust."

"Not *them*. *They* won't hurt you." The words *them* and *they* aren't spoken as a threat. She says it reverently. She likes the Hawthornes. "The highest bidder. They won't take kindly to damaged goods."

In the cell last night, James talked about the auction.

"Sacrifices" is what he called us.

What he called me.

Good little sacrifice.

Clara's words and the way she says them suggest she knows. She's participated in these barbaric acts before.

I stare at her, assessing her age. Lines wrinkle her forehead and the space over her mouth. Beneath the layers of makeup, I find a couple of dark spots on her cheeks. Age spots.

No, this isn't her first sick rodeo. I'm not sure if it's even the second.

"They hurt the women? Here?"

"One buyer did," she whispers, then raises a hand, snapping her fingers and barks, "Get to it."

The other women's heels clink on the floor as they scurry off.

"Over forty years ago." During James and Oliver's fathers' initiations. Bastards. "She bit her nail. Ruined the manicure we had worked on that morning. He ordered us to remove all of her nails so she'd learn never to bite them again. Since she was his, our bosses allowed it. But don't you worry. Your nails won't be painted, as per Mr. Hawthorne's orders."

My eyes bulge. My body goes into shock, knees buckling.

The distress I'm in makes Clara's job easier. She wastes no time dragging me to the tall bed in the center of the room. To the only furniture

in here other than the metal table positioned next to it.

Clara grabs me gently by the shoulders, guiding my naked body on top of the table with paper sprawled on the bed.

I get lost inside my head almost instantly.

My survival instincts are a living thing inside my body. They rebel against my dissociation. They push against my ribs and tell me to run, run, run. I have to do something. Like punching Clara, who stands close to my face. Sprint toward the door, try the lock.

And run.

Just. Run.

What for?

I'm outnumbered. Outmatched.

This isn't the time to fail.

James might have shown me his somewhat softer side yesterday. There wasn't just violence and insanity in his expression, in his voice. In his touch. He was part human. Somewhere, down there.

He was also extremely determined to prove that he was going through with this, no matter what.

I can't count on him. I can't count on any of the guards not to shoot me on sight.

What's left for me to do then?

Two things.

First is beg. Maisie is the weakest link. Not weak in the sense of powerlessness. Weak as in I can exploit her meekness. She hasn't looked me in the eye since she walked inside my cell.

She still isn't looking at me when she's back, placing the hot wax and strips on the table next to me. She might even care about me. Might hate what they're doing here.

I could convince her to help. She has to know of a secret passage.

That might fail, though. If it does, there's the riskier option of the two—make a run for it on the way to my buyer's home. But that could be too late. They might handcuff me to their car.

Let's pray the first one works.

Clara passes Poppy a pair of tweezers. In her other hand, she's holding on to the silver bowl and a cloth hanging from the rim.

Maisie's eyes are glued to the floor.

This is it. The right moment. My chance to get out of here.

I swing my hand to the side.

Hot wax splashes on the table, just a small portion. The rest cascades down to the floor, the pouring container *clinking* and *clanking* as it hits the stone tiles.

“Oh, no!” Poppy is quick. In hurried small steps, she rushes to the accident site, no doubt about to clean it up.

“I’ll go get cleaning products.” Clara rushes out of the room. “And a new batch of wax,” she murmurs to herself.

It doesn’t escape me that she hasn’t reprimanded Maisie. I bet she thinks pointing fingers is a waste of time.

Or maybe she wants her colleague to stay alive.

“Crap.” Maisie is flushed and frozen for a split second. She’s about to sink to the floor and help Poppy the next.

The fuck she is. I reach out, fingernails digging into her bicep. With the last ounce of strength I have, I drag her to me.

Her hands fly to balance herself on the bed. Her pupils are huge, her mouth gaping.

Deer caught in the headlights.

I hear Poppy down there, scrubbing furiously. She must be cleaning the mess I made with the wet cloth that she brought for me.

Doesn’t matter. What’s important is she isn’t paying attention to us.

I yank Maisie closer, lifting my head so she can’t miss it when I mouth, *Help me*.

No, she mouths back. *Can’t. Sorry.*

This is the most desperate I’ve ever been. I feel the tears prickling. The quickening of my pulse. *Please. Please.*

Please, she mouths back, trying to rip herself away from my death grip. *Let go. I’m sorry.*

“Ophelia, Ophelia, Ophelia.” I’d recognize Topher’s voice anywhere. For the first couple of months we’d dated, I’d have given everything to hear it. It has bile creeping up my throat now. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Maisie is still my hostage as he approaches. I hope he’s alone. If that’s the case, she and I could gang up on him. I’d kick Poppy in the gut, and Maisie could help. She’d hold her coworker down while I punch Topher.

Maybe I could escape.

Maybe.

“Please, Maisie.” My voice breaks. “Please.”

“Can’t.” Tears well in her eyes right before a man rips her from my hold.

A man in a black tuxedo with a tattooed hand and icy-cold eyes.

“No!” I scream, scrambling out of the bed.

Topher grabs me by the hip and shoulder, slamming me back to where I was. He’s using so much force that all the air whooshes from my lungs. I cough, looking at his blue eyes, as if he’s the most loathsome man to walk the earth.

At least James had the decency to show me an ounce of compassion.

Bam.

His hand cracks across my cheek.

“That’s enough,” his dad thunders.

“Oh, please. It wasn’t that bad.” The fuck it was. This is abuse. When James humiliated me, it was hot. This is pure evil. “Look at her. The skin isn’t even red.”

“We don’t hit them.” James’s command is final. He’s furious. “Back away.”

Topher rolls his eyes.

“Fuck you.” I don’t make the mistake of spitting on him too. I’ll throw up if he licks my saliva.

“I wish.”

“Topher, last warning.”

I almost throw up for real when his leering eyes take in my nakedness. Even though James is there, growling low and feral, I’m not safe. I’ll never be around these people.

Despite the fear, I steel myself. I won’t flinch like I want to. Won’t show them I’m scared.

I will show *him* that I’m pissed off, though. I’ve been waiting for him to look at me like this for six fucking months.

He doesn’t get to do this now. Stare at me as though he wishes he could devour every inch of my body.

Not now when I feel absolutely nothing for him.

My hands clench into fists. My teeth are bare. “Go to hell.”

“You know, Ophelia.” With one last growl from James, Topher releases me. He tugs on the lapels of his black tux that matches his dad’s. “When you told me about all those times you had to fight back when you were in

foster care, I never believed you. Thought you were overselling it. Guess you were telling the truth."

James strides to his side, his gait confident. Nothing in his expression or demeanor suggests that we were intimate in any way last night.

"Why would I want to oversell my shitty life, asshole?" I won't raise my voice. Won't let him think he's gotten to me. He hasn't. "Only thing I tried to do is get you to open up too. To talk to me instead of staring for hours. But no. You gave me nothing. You are nothing, you boring motherfucker. Why I ever asked you to put your miserable dick in me is beyond me."

He lifts his hand again.

James is quick to grab his wrist.

"I said"—he stares his son down—"we don't hit them."

The underlying threat is palpable.

"Fine, fine." Topher shrugs him off, his hand pressing to my thigh. Pulling it aside. "She's not getting out of this without a punishment, though."

James's glare is aimed at his son's free hand as it slides up my body. Topher grabs my waist, and a thunderstorm flashes over James's face.

"Let her go." He doesn't wait for Topher to obey, grasping his other wrist and forcing his hand off me. His fingertips graze my skin. It's an effort to silence the moan in my throat. "You'll leave marks."

He sounds as detached and impersonal as he was last night. His gaze though, is on fire. When he blinks, the flames are gone.

James releases him, staying close.

Topher laughs. "There are punishments that won't leave marks."

The nerve of him. "I'm being auctioned against my fucking will." I dart my furious glare between the two men. "Isn't that punishment enough?"

"Being sacrificed as part of our tradition isn't a punishment." God, I would pay anything to kick my ex in the balls. Not even twice. Once. That's it. "Humiliating you is."

Humiliation.

Heat flares like wildfire from my chest to my neck to my cheeks.

Last night was more humiliating than anything Topher might have in store for me. I was James's plaything. I came on his fingers. I longed for his touch.

I shouldn't take more. I can't take more of this.

No more body betrayal or begging the wrong man for the freedom he'll never grant me.

Then again…maybe I'm not in a weak position after all.

I could use it against them.

My eyes snap to James. I could rat him out to Topher. Tell his son how, while he was sound asleep in his bed, his dad was with me in the cell. Defiling me. Touching me. Tucking me in.

Topher has no love for me, but this will definitely be a blow to his inflated ego.

They might fight and—

A subtle, swift shake of James's head stops me in my tracks.

There's a worse threat than Topher's promise to punish me in his eyes.

He'll kill me if I say anything. He won't do it slowly, either.

He makes me feel like a child. He makes me feel hot all over.

By hinting that he might kill me.

What the fuck.

"Just get it over with." I sigh, turning my gaze to Topher. It hurts less to focus on him. "Whatever it is, do it already and go away."

Heels clink across the room, and Clara appears behind the two men.

"Here, Poppy." She lowers a plastic container overflowing with cleaning supplies at her side. The silver bowl with the hot wax is placed on the table. Once she's done, her attention is on the two men staring at me. "The wax is ready. I've got it from here."

"We've got it." Topher smirks, and I shiver.

Surely, he's not planning on waxing me himself. He probably hasn't done it in his life. There'll be bruises on my skin. It'll hurt so bad.

"Excuse me, Mr. Hawthorne?" This is the first sign of confusion on Clara's face. She tugs at the collar of her uniform. "That was an accident before. I assure you it won't happen again."

"I know it won't." He smirks at me. "We're staying here as observers. Once my sacrifice's pussy is spotless, we'll leave."

He wasn't messing around. He's planning on humiliating me, almost as much as James had. And this time, I won't get off on it.

The air in the room crackles. No one speaks for the longest moment. I won't let them see they scare me. I'll die before I do.

Topher hasn't won. Neither of these pricks have. The monster who'll buy me won't, either. They can humiliate me, demean me, make me wet

despite myself.

They won't break me.

Topher quirks an eyebrow. I flip him off.

James is silent.

"All right, girls." Clara's voice lacks the confidence from before. It cracks, just a tiny bit. Her hand squeezes my shoulder briefly. "Let's get to it."

I suck in a deep breath. Go deep inside my head, digging up memories of my colleagues. My parents. The good foster homes that had taken me in. The nights I slept in a decent bed. The mornings when I had eggs and bacon for breakfast instead of someone screaming in my face.

Trying to, anyway.

Familiar faces and homey scents are there and gone.

In their place, a dark entity slips in. Icy eyes. Deft fingers.

Come all over my hand.

Black. Black. Black.

Better to think about nothing at all than have my pussy dripping in front of these people.

This cult.

"There you go, Miss Monroe." Poppy is gentle when she pulls my other leg aside.

"Mr. Hawthorne," Clara urges. "You really don't have to be here."

"Dad can go if he's uncomfortable. I'm good exactly where I am."

"Shut up and let them do their job." James isn't as composed as he'd like the room to believe. The muscles in his neck bulge. His nostrils flare. "There won't be any more of this disrespect, do you hear?"

"Jesus, chill." Topher laughs, and it's a cruel one. Worse than before.

We'll see who has the last laugh when I come back to murder you. All of you.

Both men cross their arms over their broad chests. The first swipe of hot wax is smeared on my pussy, and I gnash my teeth. Silence every possible reaction to the pain.

I'm being treated like I'm…I'm…

Nothing.

Fuck them.

My eyes are locked on their faces. Though they stare at the spot between my legs, I face them head-on. I won't cower. Won't show fear.

If they humiliate me, it's only because I choose to be humiliated.

And I don't. I will not be humiliated ever again by either of the Hawthorne men.

"It will only hurt a little," Maisie whispers, her voice small.

Being waxed hurts a whole fucking lot. But I don't tell her that. I keep any hint of pain away from my expression at the first and second tearing sensations that ripple through me.

At the third, James is no longer fixated on my pussy and spread legs. His eyes are on my face, and it's terrifying. His irises are black. Gone is the blue. The sliver of compassion and heat.

His gaze reminds me of the dead of night. The darkest hour. The moment my parents were lowered to the ground.

That kind of black.

James has forgotten my pussy exists, it seems like.

He dips his chin, burrowing his gaze into my head.

Fuck his darkness. Fuck his silent reassurances.

Fuck his intense glare.

I'm not falling for it.

We mean nothing to each other.

Nothing.

I focus on controlling my breaths. On masking the pain with a brave, probably psychotic grin.

"I'm fine." I seethe when in reality I'm sensitive, and damn it, it stings. "Really fucking fine."

Topher chuckles at the sight of my reddened skin at the fourth pull.

James twists to face him. "Get out."

"Dad, I—"

"You've been warned. Get out. Go back upstairs." I don't think he notices that his fingers press to my shoulder. That he's applying so much pressure that he pushes me to the bed. I loathe the small comfort it lends me. "I'll handle her punishment from here."

"Fuck. Fine." Topher's smirk is derisive, but at last, he leaves.

I won't thank James for this. I won't. He didn't do this for me, this monster. I'm sure of it.

I stare at him with all the hate I can muster. He takes it, his eyes never leaving mine.

Fuck you, I say in my head.

I can almost hear his response. *I could do that and so much worse.*

Moments pass, then—

"We're done here." His eyes close for the briefest moment, and then he returns to his old self. Back straight. Shoulders squared. He talks to Clara over my head. "Finish waxing her whole body. Wash her. She needs to be presentable."

They say, "Yes, Mr. Hawthorne," as he leaves the room.

Fuck you, Mr. Hawthorne.

I've been so foolish for letting myself fall for him last night. So stupid for believing he might save me.

Fuck you very much.

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8

JAMES

The auction house isn't as packed as it is on any other night.

Not that I ever visit here. I oversee the operations.

According to the rules of our partnership, Oliver reports directly to me. He tells me all about how the place fills to the brim. If the employees we housed in the same block—the one we bought years ago—have any trouble, he lets me know about that too.

I look around the main floor, at the space we renovated when we got the property. We demolished the six bedrooms in favor of opening up the space to create a ballroom-like appearance.

The only remaining rooms are the kitchen, the dining area, and the area behind the stage, where the women prepare and wait to be called on stage.

What used to be a home that housed families for centuries is now a decadent space for women to sell themselves to the highest bidder.

Antique chandeliers hang from the high ceilings, casting a uniform amount of light across the open space and the hardwood floors.

A dim, warm light and nothing more. Too bright, and it'd hurt their sense of privacy. Too dark, and someone might entertain the idea of sneaking in their cameras or phones.

For today, we've set it up so that a few rows of chairs are aligned in front of the stage. In each auction, the buyers occupy them, their eyes glued to the bid caller, Starlee, and the women she invites on stage.

Our security team is responsible for maintaining the peace. They roam the area in their black tuxes and the guns that are shoved in the holsters on

their pants, much like they do now.

A dozen accidents have happened here in total over the years. A dozen buyers that our men had to put down.

Oliver gets off on that shit. On running this place.

That's why I assumed our regular operations would be enough to satisfy him. That he'd agree that our family's rituals were unnecessary. That they were fucking bullshit.

Well.

I keep the disdain out of my expression, not giving any of the fifty-seven buyers a glimpse into my soul.

Oliver and I handpicked each and every person who's walked through these doors.

Fifty of the most influential men and women in the state of New York. Two high-ranking members from the FBI. Two officials from DC. Three of the heads of the New York Mafia.

Some of them are young. It's their first time here. For others, it's the second time around.

I had to help Oliver, had to be a part of the process, despite the bile rising in my throat when I went through their names.

Oliver's hackles were up ever since I'd suggested we drop this.

True, I could've shot him. Wouldn't have lost sleep over it. But killing him on a whim without a plan would've been reckless. Could've raised suspicions, invited the others to turn on me.

And by others, I also mean my son.

The way he thought he had any claim on Ophelia…

My mouth snaps shut before my lips can twist into a snarl.

Enough of that. He might change. He might not.

I'll find out soon enough.

Until then, I do what's expected of me. Stand in the back. Scan the crowds.

One man stands out over the rest. Alessandro Caruso, leader of the Cosa Nostra. A seventy-year-old, six-foot-four man with thick black hair. Small brown eyes.

Almost twenty-two years ago, he had a bidding war with Maxim Morozov, then the head of the Bratva. A bid for my virgin sacrifice. He drank too much. He lost.

He isn't drinking tonight.

Judging by the severe set of his jaw, he won't let it happen again. He's going to outbid everyone in the room. Leave this place with one of the two sacrifices.

It's good that he's here. Means he has no idea that I embarrassed Morozov by sending a man to kidnap my sacrifice the same night. A man no one could ever trace back to me took her, and that was that.

What isn't good is that he might not be leaving this place alone.

He could be walking out of here with *her*.

I imagine Ophelia's arm looped around his. Forced to be there. Despite the warnings we issued, she won't go down easily. She won't let anyone carry her away.

She won't wait for my man to save her.

She doesn't know anyone's coming for her.

And she'll be punished for it. Here, in front of all these people. Where I can't do anything about it.

Sharp pain slashes through my temples.

He might force her to her knees if she curses and tries to run like she did earlier today. Five people surrounded her, and she tried to run. Proud and furious.

Blood rushes between my ears, drowning out the rest of the world.

Oliver comes up to me and talks about nothing, really. People approach us and shake our hands.

The mayor. He brought his wife along. They're looking for a long-time playmate or some bullshit.

All background noise.

The memories of Ophelia consume me.

She was about to spill our secret to Topher. She was bold and fearless as she prepared herself to go through with it. Exceptionally beautiful as she glowered at me. As her eyes issued numerous threats.

She was naked. Bare. Spread.

Still, she challenged me.

It got my dick hard. Had my head going in the absolutely wrong direction.

I don't need a woman in my life.

If I want someone for a quick fuck, all I have to do is pick up the phone. Which I haven't done, ever. I could also go to a bar or I don't know, any fucking way. But no. I've been on my own for a while.

Sex is a distraction.

I don’t need it.

Don’t need her.

I don’t.

Oliver frowns at me. He must be waiting for an answer. I nod, and he smiles at the noncommittal gesture. Normally, I’d like to know what I’m agreeing to.

Today, it doesn’t matter. In a few weeks, Oliver will be buried six feet under. Nothing but a distant memory.

Another person walks up to us. A woman in a pale blue gown that matches the color of her eyes. Effie Johnson.

She’s a client of our law firm. The daughter of a real estate mogul. I shake the blonde’s hand. Feel her warm fingers. It’s deceptive, her soft touch. Her smile.

The woman not only spreads revenge porn of her exes online, but when the mood strikes, she points a gun at their parents, makes them fuck for the camera, then the world.

Abhorrent, really.

Thankfully, the judge in her case was a regular here. A few witnesses and evidence were disqualified. The defense’s objections were overruled.

Nothing stuck.

“James. Oliver. For a second there, I wasn’t sure I’d get an invitation.” She bats her long lashes at both of us. I pity the women who fall for that trap. You really took your time sending that RSVP.”

“Had to get it just right.” Oliver grins at her. He, too, pretends to be a decent person. Everyone in this room is faking it, me included.

A decent person wouldn’t have kidnapped his son’s girlfriend. A decent person wouldn’t have had his cock throbbing from watching her pussy get waxed. He sure as fuck wouldn’t have stormed off to his bathroom to get off after that.

“Of course,” she purrs. It’s almost time to start. The people in the room take their seats behind Effie. She’s not done talking, though. To me. “I caught a glimpse of Topher a few weeks ago. He had his lady friend around his arm. That was her, right? She’s a special one. I wouldn’t have handed her over to just anyone, either.”

I wouldn’t hand her over to anyone, period.

Shut up.

“Camden’s virgin is equally exquisite.” At Oliver’s boasting, she raises her eyebrows. “Wait till you get your eyes on her. Natural blonde. Ocean-blue eyes. Curves for days.” He leans into her. “A crier.”

“Oh. *Oh*.” Effie raises a hand to her collarbone. The skin of her slender arm prickles. “Hmm. And here I thought the best thing I’d gotten from knowing either of you was my get-out-of-jail-free card.”

“She’s quick to kneel too.” Oliver’s repulsive behavior reminds me why I don’t step foot in our auction house.

“You sure know how to charm a girl.” She winks at him, then lets him escort her to her seat.

They walk away, and I see his chest puffing. He gets hard on the attention.

All I give a fuck about is having this city under my thumb.

And Ophelia in my bed.

No.

Rage simmers inside me. My head pounds.

She’s messing with me. With my sanity.

“Let’s go.” Oliver has returned to my side, his smile smug. “Camden just texted me. Both of them are inked and waiting for us to initiate them.”

“Certainly.” I straighten my back. My tie. Harden my features.

I’m empty inside. Feel nothing warm and fuzzy toward the initiation. For my son officially becoming one of us.

Least of all, I feel nothing for *her*.

They’re a part of my plan. Items to tick off my list.

Nothing more.

OUR EMPLOYEES HAVE CLEARED out the back room behind the stage, except for one woman. She’s silent. Hidden behind a thick wine-colored curtain. Waiting for us to call her.

The lights back here have been dimmed to a bare minimum. Candles have been placed strategically along the walls of the sixty-square-foot room. They flicker in the darkness, offering enough illumination to see our sons and their sacrifices.

Oliver staged the scene. I gave him the go-ahead, doing as was expected of me. Again.

Which isn't what I'm doing now.

With the sterilized, ancient dagger in my hand, I'm supposed to be looking at my son, who stands in front of me.

If not Topher, I should be talking to Oliver, who's at my side.

Or to his son, Camden, who looks nothing like his dad and so much like his dead mother, with his bright blue eyes and sandy blond hair. The one I, unfortunately, couldn't save.

We're about to welcome these two young men into our inner circle. Listen to them chant the words every man in our lineage had.

That's what's important.

This so-called history in the making.

Yet I can't keep my eyes off her.

Ophelia and—what's her name—Baylor are huddled in the corner, where they should be, according to our tradition.

The girls wear identical long-sleeved, laced black gowns. They've been tailored so they reach their ankles, right above their bare feet. Their hair was straightened and left loose to cascade down the front of their bodies.

Minimal makeup. Pale pink lipstick. Dark mascara on their lashes.

Black silk panties, no bra.

A carbon copy of our sacrifices' outfits and makeup, other than the nails.

We were initiated in a different room than this one. A place we burned to the ground. But ours were positioned in the corner too. They were threatened to stay there *or else* while we were tattooed, then welcomed into the inner circle by our fathers.

I shouldn't be looking at her.

I can't stop.

Back then, my attention was trained on my father. At his dark, thinning hair and jade green eyes. Relief flooded my veins.

The girls held little to no importance to me, but I could save them, so I did.

"Dad?" Topher's annoyed voice cuts into my thoughts. Stops me from staring at the beautiful young woman. Her hands are balled into fists, ready to fight. "Are we going to start or what?"

Or what. Such blatant disrespect.

“We are.” At that, Oliver and I flip our free hand to face up in tandem.

Topher and Camden each tug up the sleeves of their tuxes and place their hands in ours, also facing up. The tattoo artists left their inked hands unbandaged for the second part of the ceremony.

My son’s blue eyes are directed at mine.

There’s no reason for me to be distracted when he’s this close.

Except I’m tuned into Ophelia’s quickened breaths. Her angry energy. I sense it down in my bones.

The time we spent together in the cell offered me a glimpse into her soul. It formed a connection between us.

The fire. The tears. The frustration. How she was desperate to be touched. So many things I couldn’t see from afar.

If I walked over there and placed the dagger in her hand, I’d probably be dead within seconds.

It’d be a glorious way to go.

Someone clears their throat. Fuck if I know who. Fuck if I care.

I’m back to pretending the girl with the black hair and wild eyes isn’t here.

No, that’s a lie. As Topher and I level our gazes and I place the tip of the dagger on the spot between his thumb and index finger, I don’t pretend Ophelia means nothing to me.

She takes up too much space in my head for me to do that.

She’s the reason I’m feeling so many goddamn things that I have no business feeling.

Is this her plan? Is this how she wants to get out of this? By ruining me?

By planting poison ivy seeds that, with enough watering and sun, will eat me up from the inside?

Congratu-fucking-lations, then.

It’s worked.

My blood turns molten. My grip around the dagger is too tight.

I’ve grown attached. Distracted.

This isn’t me. Yet it is.

Her fault. And mine.

I’m the one who’s let her do this. Foolishly, I believed that I held all the cards. I barged into her cell, bound her hands. Forced pleasure onto her.

While she was busy infiltrating my head. Taking up residence there.

No, this couldn’t have been her plan.

It happened anyway. It was enough that she wanted me. That she hated me. Her emotions were a mess, and I fell for it.

She did it to me.

Electricity simmers beneath my skin.

Then I make the mistake of pressing the blade to Topher's skin and nick it before it's time.

"James?" My name is a question on Oliver's lips. He's concerned.

"I'm fine." It takes everything in me to stay in place. To keep up the charade when the only thing I can think of is whipping Ophelia's ass for this. How dare she be the thing I never knew I needed. "Time to start."

A huff. A hushed one from her. I hear it. I resent it.

I want to fuck that sound out of her.

The burning in my lungs is excruciating. I've never been this mad in my life.

The power isn't hers.

It's mine.

Like she is.

Never.

The word is now branded into my head. Has to stay there, a constant reminder. Otherwise, I'll lose it completely. I'll do something reckless. Belt her in front of the entire room.

Or kill everyone in it so that I can have her.

Ne. Ver.

Oliver and I share a look our fathers had the year we turned twenty-one. A dark look.

One that says *Let's get this show on the road*. Nothing in his expression suggests he notices something's off.

One nod, and we return our attention to our sons.

I start. "Tonight, you're being initiated into the Hawthorne Morgan bloodline. It's when boys turn into men. When you take on responsibilities passed on to you by your ancestors."

A derisive, hushed snort from the corner of the room. This, too, isn't Baylor. I can tell without averting my gaze to the two girls which one of them did that.

My cock throbs, infuriating me further. Her control over me can't and won't last.

After today, I won't even know where she is.

“Every move you make,” Oliver recites what his old man said to us. Feels like it happened a lifetime ago. Or yesterday. “Every thought in your head. Your wealth. None of that is yours. We’re a family. A unit.”

“An unbreakable bond.” Topher’s features turn to stone at my words.

He could be conspiring to kill me as we speak. Could have plans to take over the business. Our fortune. Every cent of it.

Makes no difference to him that I never laid a hand on him. That I haven’t demanded anything of him except to wear a condom and keep up his good grades.

He wasn’t even born out of violence, like Camden.

But he does have my father’s genes running through his veins. Poisoning him.

He’s a spoiled, hot-tempered brat.

Somehow, though, I think Ophelia will have a better chance making it in life than my son. A strange notion.

“Do you accept?”

“We accept,” both sons say in unison. Camden’s voice echoes louder in the closed room.

Out of the two men, he’s always been the more eccentric one.

Much like his father. I can’t forget the day Camden convinced Topher to lock up a girl in his bedroom in third grade. I grounded Topher for two months after that little prank.

After the motherfucking principal—who hadn’t been the auction house’s client—called us in, I talked to Topher. Warned him that if he ever steps out of line again, there’ll be consequences.

That stopped Topher from joining Camden’s reckless adventures. In return, it toned down Camden’s psychotic tendencies.

“Your vows.” In my periphery, I see Oliver’s chest expanding.

Pride swells within him. A contrast to my barely contained rage. Takes a lot of work to hide it in plain sight. Takes even more of my resolve not to steal a glance at her.

“In our legacy, we trust,” they chant. “To accept us and our sacrifice.”

A whimper reaches us, which has to be the other woman. Ophelia doesn’t make a sound, but her contempt is glaringly obvious.

Ignoring her, Oliver and I dip our chins in acknowledgment. A sign that we accept. That they should continue.

“Our bloodline is sacred.” Topher pushes his shoulders back. Tilts his palm deeper into the blade. “It will never die.”

Their part of the ceremony is over. I, as does Oliver, push the dagger into my son’s palm. I break the skin a second time. Both of us slice a horizontal line across the inside of their palms.

I toss the dagger to the side so it won’t stain our tuxes, raising my hand to snap my fingers. The girl from behind the curtain rushes to us, bandaging Camden’s bleeding hand first.

Meanwhile, I keep holding on to Topher’s. His blood soaks my palm and drips down to the floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Crimson on slate gray stone. A bond is created. A vow made, one I plan to break.

My plan. That’s what matters.

Not a dark-haired girl. Not the images of me punishing her.

Definitely not the depraved desires of bringing her metaphorically and physically to her knees.

This.

The end of these men and thus this legacy, which will happen sometime after the scheduled week off at home alone, is the only thing that matters.

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9

OPHELIA

Lights, camera…

Nightmare.

“Esteemed buyers.” Camden stands tall on the stage before me. His bandaged hand is curled around his sacrifice’s arm—*gross*. Around Baylor’s bicep. “I would like to present to you Baylor Marie Carpenter.”

The poor girl whimpers. It’s not the first time she’s done it during this long, creepy and fucked-up evening. Knowing it won’t be the last, my heart twists painfully for her.

Her body breaks out in shivers as silence ensues. As, I imagine, that bastard is allowing the pristine monsters to appraise her.

We’re not cattle, I want to scream from my place at the back of the stage.

As if sensing it, Topher’s grip on my arm tightens. His bandaged hand repulses me. I hope both men—no, not men, but motherfuckers—will pay for this. Pray that their tattoos and fresh cuts get infected, and they die.

I enjoyed watching the dagger slice through their palms. Was about to run over there, snatch the dagger from James, and pierce it through the men’s hearts. All four of them.

That wasn’t the right time, though.

Even if I managed to kill them somehow, I couldn’t make it out of this place alive. I don’t know the layout. Couldn’t see it on my way in, when I was carried inside hurled over a man’s shoulder with a black, opaque bag over my head.

Then there's the matter of the guards. James had a few in his place. I guessed there must be more of them here, swarming the auction house. I was right.

Which is why I'm waiting patiently here to be sold off to some fucker. I like my chances better outside, where I can run and hide behind a house or a car. A tree, maybe.

I'll never look back.

I'll get help for Baylor once I'm freed. Try, at least. I'll get out of this damn state, then file an anonymous complaint to the FBI. There must be someone out there who will go against James.

Until then, I let Topher's slimy fingers stay where they are.

Acid burns the line of my stomach.

This ceremony. These men.

Me. I disgust myself. Because if James were the one holding me, the whole ordeal wouldn't have been as awful. I hate him for this. For manipulating me. For this unhealthy attachment festering inside me.

It's a lie. All of it. He won't make anything better. The man standing at the back of the room, arms crossed over his chest, is a bastard.

A lonely bastard. Surprisingly, Oliver isn't there beside him. The other monster is perched up against the wall closest to the first line of chairs.

Whatever. Oliver doesn't interest me. I don't hate him for leading me on. He hasn't.

It's James who's earned my fury.

For the longest second, I hold his gaze. Send him a clear message of how badly I despise him. His eyes gleam at my anger, and fuck him. I won't let him enjoy this.

I cut my gaze to Baylor, and my heart crumples as I watch her profile. Her chin wobbles. She's barely hanging on.

"My sacrifice"—*Camden, you sick fuck*—"has turned eighteen this year."

Baylor's body shakes harder. Her long, blonde tresses vibrate. Her fists clench and unclench at her sides.

My toes tingle on the stage floor. I'm this close to ripping Topher's eyes out and tearing myself from his grip. I wish so fucking hard to fold Baylor into my arms and save her. Tell her over and over that she'll be all right.

I whispered it to her over and over while we were forced to watch the fuckers get inked. Told her not to cry, not to let them see they got to us.

With my hand clutching onto hers, she managed to swallow down the tears.

But this.

These people in tuxedos and gowns glaring at us. The security personnel, dressed in black suits and carrying guns on display.

The motherfucking doctor's exam table positioned between me and her.

It's horrible. Awful. Inhumane.

She's breaking down and I can't do a damn thing about it.

"A virgin, of course." Camden twists his head to look down at her.

Her blue eyes catch his. A single word from her mouth. "Please."

He doesn't dignify her with a response. Doesn't move a muscle.

Oh, I was wrong. He does move. She whimpers, her other hand covering his. The one that has a death grip on her.

He's squeezing her. Hurting her.

"Motherfucker," I hiss. Can't help it.

"Shut up," Topher hisses back at me. I keep my eyes on Baylor. "You pull a stunt like that when we're up there, and you'll pay for it. I'll sell you to the cruelest, most sadistic prick out there. The highest bidder? Not for you, pretty girl. You'll get the worst one."

James probably wouldn't approve. He made a big deal about going through with this monstrosity in just the right way. He isn't on stage, though.

If he were, he might've gotten angry at Topher. Might have had enough of his son's disrespect. He could've pulled the plug on the whole thing.

Out of the four men, he seems like the one who wields the most power.

I wish I could call out for him. Remind James that we shared a moment yesterday, as depraved as it was. Beg him to make this stop.

Except I can't.

He doesn't care about my well-being. About Baylor's.

The only reason he didn't let Topher hurt me wasn't because he cares. It was because I'm his merchandise. I have to remember that.

"Fine." My nails dig crescents into the inside of my palms. A spiteful grin splits my face in two. "I'll shut up."

A low growl reverberates from his chest. We're close enough that I feel it. Then he huffs and smooths his thumb over my arm. Once. An affectionate touch.

Yeah, right.

I won’t throw up, no. Baylor needs me here, on the stage, behind her.

“Granted, you’ll need guarantees.” Camden’s smile can be heard over his words. Baylor’s sobs are just as loud. He gives her a subtle shake. “Though we won’t be the ones doing the examination this year. This year, we have a doctor who’ll perform it.”

My stomach dips. My palms go clammy.

When Topher brought me on stage, I suspected the exam table was some kind of a cruel joke. I thought James had lied the night before. That he touched and probed me and made me orgasm for his own sadistic pleasure.

Everyone here, other than Baylor and me, is fucking insane.

“No.” Her anguished cry bounces off the walls. A redheaded woman in an emerald gown and the man to her side share a look. Share a laugh. Jesus Christ. “Please, please. Somebody help me. I was kidnapped. I’m not—I said no. I swear I said no.”

Baylor’s begging gets a low applause from the *buyers*. The psychos.

They’re entertained.

My stomach roils. I’m going to be sick.

I’m too shocked to be sick.

Someone is actually coming to examine her. Us.

A doctor. An older bald man in a white lab coat brushes past Topher. He’s waited behind the scenes, and now he’s here, slamming his black leather bag onto the metal table next to the exam table.

“All set,” the brittle man announces, pushing his large glasses up onto his nose.

“Let’s go.” I watch, horrified, as Camden spins him and Baylor to us.

“No!” she screams. Tears stream down her cheeks. No black streaks here. Only the best mascara for us miserable sacrifices. “Please, don’t do this. I s-s-swear I’m a virgin. You believed me before, didn’t you? Camden. Camden. Please.”

My body goes numb. Last night, I basically said the exact same words to James. Cried and pleaded and demeaned myself. Everything I could to get him to stop.

Only difference is, deep down, I liked it. I refused him, but there was no hiding how much I enjoyed his attention. His touch. His sickness.

He could tell I did.

Prick.

“Please,” Baylor cries, and I can’t take it.

My rage is too hard to contain. Someone has to be on the receiving end of it.

And that someone is James. I lock eyes with him again, against my better judgment.

Darkness clouds his features. His jaw tics.

I really don't think he likes what's going on here, yet no part of him raises his voice to put an end to this.

Fuck you, I shout at him in my head. *Fuck you for making me come. Fuck you for the hope you planted inside me. For making me hate you any less than I should. I'll see you in hell, motherfucker*.

He tilts his head like he might actually hear me. Like I amuse him.

"Please." Baylor. She needs me. The only person on her side in this God-awful room.

In the world.

Earlier, she confided in me. Told me in a hushed, broken voice that no one would come to save her. There will be no search parties, either.

Her drunk dad, who beats her up for sport, would never even file a missing person's report. Her mother, who almost died the last time her dad bashed her face into a wall, took off over a decade ago and never returned. She doesn't have uncles or aunts. Her grandparents are long dead.

Camden had informed her that he'd texted her friends, letting them know that she'd run from her abusive dad. That, for her sake, they shouldn't go looking for her.

She sure as fuck doesn't have a boyfriend.

I have to be strong for her.

I have to suffer through this pain in my chest. For her.

Fuck, it's a punch to the gut to look at her.

While I was hot for James, it's obvious Baylor isn't getting off on this. Her wide eyes are frantic. Snot runs down her nose. She doesn't try to wipe it. Doesn't seem to care as sheer terror and panic grip her.

It's okay, I mouth to her as she trembles next to the exam table. *It'll be all right*.

"Get up here." Nothing is remotely all right when Camden hauls her off the floor bridal style and deposits her on the table. The paper scrunches beneath her. She's screaming and kicking, poor thing. "Don't fuck this up," he whispers as he wipes the snot off her discreetly. "Or I'll have a man rape and slaughter your mother."

“What?” She and I both gasp. “How did you—”

“We have people everywhere.” He lets out a low, repulsive chuckle. Raises his disgusting blue eyes to me in warning. Snaps them back to her. “Keep this up, Baylor, and I’ll send them to finish what your father couldn’t.”

That manages to silence her, which is somehow worse. She sobs quietly, trembling from head to toe as Camden places her feet on the metal stirrups.

“That’s my boy.” My skin crawls at the sound of Topher’s whisper. “That’s how it’s done. Fucking own the bitch.”

How have I missed this side of him?

Why in the world did I try to rekindle what I had with this psychopath?

“You know, Sage is out. She’ll be back late.” I played with the lapel of his gray jacket one night at my doorstep.

That night, I was tipsy, and so was he. He actually talked to me during that dinner. Said that he and I weren’t that different since both our moms were dead.

“Okay.” His fingers curled around mine. Didn’t pry my hand off him like he always did. “Then?”

I took a moment to study his face. Search for the secrets he’d been keeping from me. Or maybe he didn’t have any secrets, and he was just dull. Either way, I had to find out.

There was something there before. How did we lose it?

“You could come up if you want.”

He closed the blinds over his pale blue eyes before I could figure him out. Disappeared behind his shield.

Disappointment. Another one.

Months ago, his darkness had sparked a million lights within me. I was desperate to feel that again. Needed him to quit this obsession with my virginity. We could be explosive together. In a good way. In the best way.

“We talked about this.” His brow furrowed. He stepped back into the hall. “Your virginity.”

“Yes, yes.” No sparks. No excitement. No falling feeling.

I needed him gone. For life.

That moment sealed our fate.

I gave our relationship my best because I believed in us.

I gave it my best until I couldn’t.

Now, all that's left is to get as far away from the Hawthorne men as possible.

That's my good girl, the memory of James's voice whispers in my ear.

Stupid brain. He wasn't praising me. He was mocking me.

He's just as insane as Topher is.

"You're going to feel a little pressure," the doctor from hell says to Baylor.

Camden is at the top of the exam table, stroking her hair. Pretending to care.

Bullshit. It's a reminder of his threat.

Another whimper escapes her when the doctor opens the speculum's bill. Fuck, I'm so angry I could burst into flames.

"Calm the fuck down." Topher must sense my murderous energy. I'm snarling too. Could be that. "Consider this your final warning."

Telling him his father performed the same exam on me last night would be delicious. James isn't close. Can't scare me into silence.

Then again…

The guards. They're spread out across the room. Two of them even have a clear shot at me. James might be furious if Topher starts shouting and causing a scene. One word from him, and I'll be dead.

Fine. Fuck him.

Poor Baylor stares up at the ceiling while she's being checked and probed. In her delirious state, she reaches for Camden's hand.

The doctor exclaims, "A virgin!"

She says absolutely nothing as Camden guides her into the center of the stage. When the motherfucker takes his place behind the podium.

"The starting bid on my and Topher's sacrifices will be the same." Camden has his hand on Baylor's shoulder. The other is flattened on the podium.

I see red. My chest heaves with each breath, fueling my rage further.

This is it. They're going to put a price tag on us. This is actually real.

"So." From where Topher holds me hostage, I can see Camden's face. His smug grin. When I'm free, I'll wipe it off him. I swear I will. "Starting bid on Miss Carpenter is…one million dollars."

Flatline. No pulse. No air.

One million is the starting bid. I repeat that in my head.

Then it clicks. Then, I realize what and who I'm dealing with here.

They aren’t just rich. People who don’t blink at the ridiculous sum and start calling three, five, seven on a girl are wealthy. They own the city. Maybe the entire country.

I take a closer look at the crowd. The chief of police is here too. I recognize him from the news. How corrupt must he be to afford this?

Very. Fucking very.

The rest of them aren’t as well known. I don’t know most of them, which only solidifies my concern. The truly influential men and women, the ones who pull the strings, sometimes prefer to remain in the shadows.

They most likely are the real puppet masters.

And if they’re here, that only means one thing.

These sick four people who kidnapped Baylor and me are the puppet masters’ puppet masters.

James didn’t lie to me yesterday.

Damn it.

Asking them to help us would get us nowhere. Running away from the person who buys me and going to the cops would make matters worse.

No one will listen to me.

They’ll track me down.

They’ll send me back here.

Or.

They’ll have my head for snitching.

If my escape plan works, I’ll have to leave the country altogether. America will cease to be my home.

Shit. I don’t have a passport.

They took away my purse and driver’s license.

The Greyhound bus is my only option. I’ll stand in one of the corners of the central station. Beg for cash. For a ticket.

A good Samaritan or two will help, and then I’ll be off on a bus that’ll take me to the border. Any border. Canada, Mexico, I’m not picky.

Anywhere but here.

A fresh start.

Hopefully, one day, when the dust settles and everyone forgets about me, I’ll be able to return to Baylor.

Hope and resolution press against my ribs.

I’ve got this.

“Ten!” a man with curly red hair in the second row yells, a light Irish accent laced in his voice.

He breaks the streak of the civilized bids. Of people raising a hand to indicate they’d like to buy Baylor, please, and motherfucking thank you.

Tears roll down Baylor’s cheeks. So many of them that the front of her black dress is soaked. She’s crying in complete silence. Terrified of what a bid that high means.

Nothing good.

Her tears and the redhead’s shout set off a war between the buyers. A real one.

A woman in a blue gown with her blonde hair pulled back in a twist bares her teeth. “Twelve!”

“They’ll pay much more for you.” Topher’s lips press to my temple. Softly. Like he cares. I curb the urge to scream. One day, I’ll have my hands around his repulsive neck and I’ll choke him. “That fire in your eyes. I wish I had noticed it sooner. I would’ve used you for something else. Too late now.”

Something else?

His words throw me off.

This doesn’t make any sense. None of this does.

“What are you talking—”

Topher pushes my chin so I’m back to facing the crowd. “Shut the hell up.”

The glimmer of hope I’ve been holding on to is snuffed out. I’m no less angry, though.

“Fifteen.” An older man with a hint of an Italian accent raises his hand from the front row.

His brown eyes are narrowed. His round face is clean-shaven. His short hair is dark with gray streaks.

My stomach lurches when he shifts his leering gaze from Baylor to me, licking his lips.

Oh no. Oh no. If someone outbids him, he’s coming for me.

There’s nothing right about this man. There’s an aura surrounding him that makes me feel the most awful things.

I’m going to destroy you. Either one of you.

If he gets us…

If he takes us…

Escape plans will be a faraway dream.

Either Baylor or I might survive, but we won't be living.

That's how dark he looks. How evil he seems.

He wants me to see it.

Final offer, he mouths to me.

I'm going to be sick.

A deep, cleansing breath.

The world's still spinning.

James. I hate him. Every cell in my body loathes and is repulsed by him. Despises his infuriating touch. The things he does to me.

I have to find his icy-blue eyes anyway. They're my only escape. The only way I can tap into my anger again, to cast away my fear.

I break eye contact with the devil before me, ignoring Topher's deranged whispered praise of: *You're going to make me so proud*.

But he isn't there.

I search the crowd. Every available space of this shithole.

No blue eyes. No terrifying shadow in the back of the room.

He's gone.

James is gone.

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10

JAMES

"Walk with me." This isn't a request. I pull one of our servers—Griffith, he said—out of the main room by his forearm. I drag him silently into the catering area without waiting for him to follow me.

Waiting is for the weak. For the second best. For the ones who aren't in a position of power.

I am neither of those things.

On the contrary.

Out of everyone in our auction house, I'm at the top of the food chain.

Oliver can tell himself that we're equal partners all he likes. I feed him that lie myself. It helps him sleep better at night. Makes him lower his guard too. Throughout the years, it's the one thing that has ensured that he won't try to backstab me.

But the truth—the *absolute* truth—is that I've been pulling the strings since we turned twenty-one.

It was me who decided how and when we murdered our fathers. When I had to kill my father ahead of schedule, Oliver followed suit.

The cases we take on, the people we hire? I sign off on those. Even the auction house. I don't frequent the place, yet Oliver asks for my approval before he makes any big decision.

"Mr. Hawthorne, please." Of course he knows me by name. My photo and name are a part of their orientation when they start working here. "I'll

follow you, I promise. Maybe you could tell me what I've done wrong. If you could just—"

"Shut up."

We're away from prying eyes and inside the kitchen. I drag him farther inside, past our French brunette chef, who oversees five cooks who work for us. I don't stop to watch them as they work seamlessly. Without the incessant noise of clinking pans and pots, or of any shouting, "You're taking too long."

They work in complete silence.

"Sir. Mr. Hawthorne, sir." Despite his whispering, I still hear Griffith's high-pitched voice. "Please, I'm not sure what I've done. Whatever it is, I'm sorry. I'll do anything to make up for it. Please, let me fix it."

We pass by tall stainless-steel shelves lining the walls. Porcelain plates imported from Copenhagen are perfectly organized on the shelves in groups of three. They'll be taken down soon to serve the late dinner.

A consolation meal for those who lost the bidding wars.

The highest bidders and the sacrifices are supposed to be escorted out to start their awfully-ever-after.

The four of us will retire to our homes to start our week-long vacation.

Later.

The storage room is empty. I throw Griffith inside, shutting the door behind me.

"Please." He hasn't let go of his empty tray. He trembles. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

His face turns into a nauseating shade of green. Sweat darkens his sandy blond hair.

And he still holds the tray.

I snatch it out of his hand, slamming it on an empty shelf to my right.

Now my fingers are free to go around his throat.

"Don't hurt me. Please." His blue eyes are oceans of fear. He either can't or doesn't bother masking it. "I have a wife. A newborn. Please. I'm begging you. Don't hurt me."

Music to my ears. That's good. That's really fucking good that he's terrified of me. The few inches I have over him make him seem even weaker.

You don't fuck over people who scare you.

“For now, I won’t.” I’d spend more time instilling fear in him. Problem is, I’m running out of it.

Alessandro is after Ophelia. While I couldn’t see his face, I saw hers. Her expression shifted when he tilted his head, looking away from Baylor.

Ophelia looked lost. Pale. A little lamb instead of the firecracker I had all to myself last night.

He’s determined to have her, no doubt.

Over the years, he has accumulated wealth. I’m his lawyer. Of course I fucking know about every dime that goes into his pocket. I am aware of his bank accounts here and the ones he has offshore.

Whatever anyone else will offer, he’ll outbid them.

He’ll have her.

Fuck.

My fist tightens around Griffith’s throat until he wheezes.

“Please, please, please.”

Why do I care if he takes her? If anyone takes her?

They won’t have her for long.

There are plans set in motion to save Ophelia from this monstrosity. A man ready to kidnap her and send her the hell out of here.

Then what is this? I can’t stop thinking about her.

I can’t allow anyone else to have her.

The way she looked at me…

So much hate. Desire. Fear.

Her emotions were bleeding all over the place.

Another trap she laid out for me, unbeknownst to her. One I fell for. One I can’t get out of. And God, it’s the worst part, isn’t it? That she doesn’t mean it. She just *does* it.

There’ll be hell to pay for this. I’ll make her regret stirring these strange emotions in my chest.

When I have her.

“I’ll kill you or your family. Maybe both. Shove your baby’s fingers up your ass. Unless you do as I say.” It’s not right to lie. To take my anger out on him.

It’s what I have.

Until she’s mine.

Until I…Yes, get to breed her.

Of course.

This is all about my primal needs. This isn't about my *feelings*. I have none.

But I do have urges that I've never attended to. The need to procreate. It'd be on my terms this time around. By fucking a woman, not inseminating her, like I did with Topher's mom.

I didn't force myself on her. I didn't touch her inappropriately. Didn't want to.

I want that now. With Ophelia.

She's young. Strong. Beautiful.

The best woman for the part.

There's no other way to rationalize this possessiveness.

None.

After a month of watching her from afar, of obsessing over her, I want her…to bear my children…so bad I can't think straight.

This is nothing but an innate, basic desire.

To have a baby with her and no one else. To fuck it into her.

That's all.

That's why the calling is so intense. Once it's a done deal, I'll get bored of her. This pull to her will fade.

At least I know now.

"I'll do anything."

"Tell anyone about this conversation." I put my face up in Griffith's. He has to remember this moment. "And guess what happens?"

"We die." Griffith lets out a pathetic sob.

"Correct."

A blood vessel pops in one of his glistening eyes. I've been gripping him too hard, so I loosen my hold. Barely.

"They'll start the bidding war on Topher's sacrifice soon."

Griffith bobs his head as much as my grip on him allows.

"You're going to go out there and call Starlee over. You'll tell her an anonymous buyer was on the line. That he told you to win no matter what." His eyes widen. No one tells that woman what to do. No one tells her a faceless person will join the auction. No one except me. "I'll be there to confirm that you ran it by me. That it's okay."

"Okay. Okay."

Tick tock. Tick tock.

“Then you’ll start bidding. Once you do, you won’t stop, like the *anonymous buyer* asked you to.”

“Are you sure?” His quivering chin says what he can’t. The people in the room bid by the millions.

“You’re wasting my time,” I hiss. “I said you won’t stop, and you won’t fucking stop. Then you’ll go out the back, collect Miss Monroe. You’ll drive to the city for ten minutes, then turn around and drop her off at the front door of my house. Are we clear?”

Where she and I will be alone with Clara. Just until she deposits Ophelia in the cell. Then, Ophelia is mine.

After that, she’ll leave with the rest of the staff for the week to a hotel. I’ll text Andrea, my assistant, to get on it and arrange three drivers to take them to the city. Then I’ll text Clara and have her get everyone packed and ready to go.

I’m not sure why I want them gone for this first week. While I get time off, they should’ve stayed on the premises, working for me.

I just want them out.

“Yes.” The shade of his face becomes impossibly whiter and greener simultaneously. “Yes, Mr. Hawthorne.”

“Go.”

His eyes skate to the shelf where I placed his tray.

“I said, ‘Go.’” I grab him by the lapel of his black jacket, open the door, and toss him out into the kitchen, leaving his stupid tray behind.

I don’t lose my temper often.

I don’t crave anything so badly that it rattles me.

Ophelia will pay for that too.

When she’s mine.

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11

JAMES

"Sold to Mrs. Johnson," Camden announces when I return to the room, ten steps behind Griffith.

The server rushes inside. He rubs his arms. Good to know the unnerving effect I had on him hasn't waned.

"Please." A weeping Baylor is being escorted off to the back of the stage.

Just in time for Griffith to lean into Starlee's ear.

"An anonymous—I—What? Are you out of your mind?" Her forehead scrunches. Green eyes furious. Her hair is pulled into a low twist, exposing her reddening nape. Griffith is pale white. "Who the hell do you think you are to fucking—"

I move to stand on her other side. "Starlee."

"Mr. Hawthorne." Her gaze snaps up to me. "Please, ignore us. There's been a misunderstanding."

"No misunderstanding." A sigh of relief rushes out of Griffith. He's about to have a coronary. "An acquaintance of mine placed the call. Griffith ran it by me. It's fine."

"Hello, everyone," Topher speaks with calm confidence. His shoulders are relaxed. Chin up. A true Hawthorne man. I would've been proud had I not been furious about how thrilled his eyes are. Had I not been drawn like a goddamn magnet to the woman he's guiding to the front of the stage. "This is Ophelia Louise Monroe. She is…"

"Are you sure?" Starlee whispers over Topher's introduction.

I don’t care that I can’t hear him. Whatever he’s telling the crowd about her, it’s lacking.

There aren’t enough words in the English language to describe her. An innocent seductress. A filthy angel. An infuriating distraction.

Or maybe there is a word.

Demise.

My demise.

Topher won’t use any of those words anyway. He was brought up to not care about anyone. To not need. Way before Oliver talked to him about the initiation. About the other things.

You’re not supposed to give a shit, either.

Too bad I noticed Ophelia. I’ll make her belly swell with a baby, then it’ll go away. I’ll be myself again, then I’ll send her off somewhere safe. Somewhere far enough so her presence won’t fuck with my head.

I’ll forget she ever existed.

It’ll be just me and our child. Whether Topher is a part of my new life or not, it’s entirely up to him.

“Positive.”

“…she’s an orphan if you’re into women with Daddy issues.” A smirk curves on my son’s lips.

My nostrils flare at his cruel joke. My muscles strain against my thousand-dollar tux.

He’s turning our ceremony into a circus. A stand-up comedy show. That’s why I’m seconds away from launching at the stage and throttling my only child.

This has nothing to do with how he’s talking about her. About what’s mine.

Mine.

Killing him right here and now won’t bode well for me. The guards might act on impulse and shoot me on the spot.

Ophelia could be kidnapped by someone who will take advantage of the chaos.

They could steal what’s mine.

Ophelia isn’t mine.

Yet.

Never.

More words come out of Topher’s mouth. Trivial facts.

Like how she dropped out of college despite being at the top of her class. That she loves the color black. She likes to read.

Someone who truly cared about her would've had so much more to say about Ophelia.

I stop listening to him and look at her. Though she's shorter than Topher by over a foot, she makes herself look taller. Stares me dead in the eye.

Unblinking, I stare back. I show her that she hasn't won this round. I'm the man who doesn't give a shit. Who doesn't have an emotional bone in his body.

I'm the one who thinks about her as a womb. As my property.

I appraise her like a piece of art. A painting that might or might not fit into my living room.

I'm being an asshole as I scan her body from her beautiful face and down to her toes. A true bastard. Cold as a rotting corpse.

I feel nothing—absolutely nothing—as I gaze at the swell of her breasts beneath the lace dress. Her peaked nipples. The dip of her stomach and that tight pussy between her legs.

When I return to her face, there's fire in her eyes. Hatred even.

The way she switches between fear, loathing, lust, and hatred is otherworldly.

Beautiful.

Infuriating.

I have to remind myself where and who I am to stop my dick from getting so. Fucking. Hard.

"Kitten has claws too." The end of Topher's introduction has me snapping my head at him. "I'm sure that those of you who get off on taming your playthings would love that."

Oliver and Camden have matching wicked grins stretching across their faces. Murmurs are a wildfire breaking across the rows of chairs, and they don't stop. Everyone's curious. Everyone's talking.

About what's mine.

Everyone except Alessandro. He ignores Brooks Callahan, the head of the Irish mob. Whatever he says to him doesn't make him twist his head to the redheaded man. He doesn't so much as bat his hand away when he taps on his shoulder.

Ophelia steals all of his focus. He's staring at her while she bows her head. That motherfucker. He's imagining her in his bed, no doubt. Picturing

her trying to escape. Trying to fight him.

He'll tear her apart.

Mine.

The notion is my fuel, propelling me to take one step forward. The next, and—

"Show us!" a man calls out, stopping me in my tracks. "Make her fight you!"

This isn't how the initiation auction is supposed to go. The buyers aren't supposed to raise their voices like Camden encouraged them to. We're not some cheap, lowlife establishment.

Worse still. No one treats Ophelia as if she's a property. No one but me.

Another step.

"Quiet." Topher gives me the bare, minimal hope that he's realized his mistake. His free hand slices through the air. The crowd falls into silence.

As do I. On the inside, though, I'm boiling. Shouting at him to get the hell away from her.

I've never been this possessive. This infuriated. A rope cinches my lungs.

My hands burn with the need to grab Ophelia and get her the hell out of here.

"People, please. You're better than this," he continues. "This shouting. It's unacceptable."

Ophelia sucks in a deep breath. They might not be shouting anymore, but it doesn't mean the worst is behind her. Not knowing what to expect is killing her. I feel her emotions as if I'm experiencing them myself.

It's maddening.

"But since one of you will be paying for her…"

My pulse slows. My brain goes in a million directions.

I shouldn't defend her. Shouldn't think about how I'd kill anyone who doesn't treat her well, my son included.

Her pain belongs to me. She belongs to me.

"I'll do it." Topher chuckles, and my heart beats louder. "I'll show you. Ophelia."

Her eyes squint as she glowers at him.

"You won't be walking to the exam table." His hand on her chin is an insult. I'm soaking in butane, ready to detonate at any given moment. "You'll crawl there. For our entertainment."

Crawl.

Ophelia on her hands and knees. For them.

Crawl.

Her ass swaying as she moves across the floor.

She'll be beneath us.

Beneath Topher.

Beneath all. These. People.

Crawl.

"You're insane." She seethes.

A man calls out, "Yes! Fight him!"

"Crawl," he hisses the same word that plays on repeat in my head. "On the ground. Now."

"Fuck you." Her escape attempts from his grip are just that. Attempts. As brave as she is, she fails, staying right where he wants her.

I'm not going to let this happen.

He won't be yanking her to the floor. Other people won't witness the gynecologist touching her. Probing her. Examining her.

She's nothing but a womb to me. But that doesn't make her any less mine.

There'll be hell to pay. For this contempt and ridicule.

Later.

I move up next to Griffith, taking advantage of the calamity in the room. Of how Starlee won't hear me when I hiss to him, "Now. Start bidding this fucking moment."

"But Mr. Hawthorne." The smell of his sweat is rancid, burning my nose.

"I'm not crawling!"

"Now, Griffith."

"Mr. Hawthorne hasn't announced—"

"I'll bring ten men to rape your wife before I kill her with my own two hands. While you watch."

I take a step back. Arms across my chest.

"Six million!" he yells so loud that Topher hears him over the laughter and excited chatter.

Heads turn. Ophelia and Topher stop wrestling on stage.

My son cocks his head. A predator. "What did you say?"

Griffith isn’t fazed. He knows the more dangerous predator is standing right behind him. Breathing down his neck. “Six million. An anonymous buyer would like to have her. No check-up needed.”

That pleases me. The anger that’s rippled through me settles further when Topher furrows his brow at Starlee. She offers him a firm nod.

I lick my lips. Steeling my posture, my expression. Staring straight ahead.

No one will see any emotion on my face.

Least of all, Ophelia. I’ve given her enough power over me. This ends here.

“Eight,” Alessandro barks. No hesitation.

“Nine.” Fucking Griffith. I would’ve bid higher for her. So much higher.

Shut the hell up.

No one cares about watching Ophelia crawl or be examined anymore. They’re going wild over her.

Bidding. Shouting. Cursing.

You’d think they were sailors. The chief of the NYPD or a woman from Congress. The rest of them.

Disdainful.

Heat prickles my skin. She’s staring at me; I can sense Ophelia’s dark eyes trying to bore holes into my skull.

I ignore her.

Eventually, when the bids go as high as eighteen million, the enthusiasm sizzles.

“Nineteen.” Alessandro’s voice is as unwavering as it was on the first bid.

“Twenty-one.” Griffith’s confidence has grown over the last few seconds. I wonder if he has any idea who he’s gone to a bidding war against.

“Twenty-three.”

The silence in the room is deafening. Ear-piercing.

It’s then that I allow myself to find her gaze. Briefly. Then my son’s.

He’s gloating. Hardly holding on to her arm anymore. She probably ceased to matter the moment her highest bid surpassed Camden’s final bid.

A movement in my periphery. Alessandro finally twists in his chair. His narrowed glare shoots daggers at Griffith, who remains firm in his place.

The air crackles, tension filling the air.

They all wonder who'll win this round.

Me. I fucking will.

"Twenty-five," he says.

My lackey doesn't blink. "Thirty million."

Alessandro's lips pinch. His hand goes to his waist, where he'd have his gun.

The one we keep in one of the safes at the door.

Ten of our guards, who line the walls, draw their weapons at Alessandro's menacing gesture. He notices them. Raises his hands briefly and curses under his breath.

"Okay. Okay." The vein in his temple throbs. He stands up. Walks over to Griffith, his hand outstretched in front of him. "*Bravo*."

Griffith, finally down from the high, wisely hesitates. "I—Thanks?"

"Yes. Thanks is the correct response." At a complete one-eighty, Alessandro smiles. An honest-to-God smile. He slaps Griffith's shoulder once. "Thanks is the answer, my friend. I might not have gotten what I came here for. The *puttana*…"

Slut.

Self-preservation wins over the blood-thirst boiling within me.

"But it was enjoyable." Alessandro laughs first. Griffith, visibly relieved, joins him, but his laugh is more of a cough. "Thank you, friend, for the entertainment."

They laugh some more. The rest of the crowd joins them.

Nothing about this scenario amuses me. Nothing about the need for revenge on her behalf makes sense to me, either.

It doesn't matter.

She matters.

Or more like, satisfying the beast inside me matters.

Topher pulls Ophelia's hands to her front and cuffs her. She growls at him, the wild animal I saw in her yesterday coming out. One of our staff stands in front of her, raising the black bag and pulling it down over her head.

Not a sound of protest comes out of her. Not the barest hint of revolt once the bag is in place.

I'd be intrigued if I hadn't known her on a base level.

She's planning to fight. When the time is right.

I'll take immense pleasure in watching her do just that.

When she sees what I have planned for her, she'll have no other choice.

TOPHER: *Boardin. Goin 2 catch some Zzzzzzz. Talk when I wake up*

Embarrassing. A twenty-one-year-old man drunk-texting his father.

I don't hold it against him, though. It doesn't even aggravate me as much as it has in the past.

I need to care in order to be pissed off.

Truth is, I don't care about any of them.

The time the four of us spent backstage together was insufferable.

One glass of champagne after the other went down their throats. They blabbered about Topher's flight to Ibiza. About Oliver and Camden's father-and-son bonding trip to Amsterdam, then to who the hell remembers.

Listening to them had me nearly rolling my eyes.

They bored me half to death.

I didn't want to be there.

Here.

Here is where I wanted to be.

Inside her cell. Watching Ophelia.

Alone.

Clara helped Griffith in getting her here. But not before I texted her that once the staff is back, should anyone, including her, mention to an outsider —yes, even Topher—about my new acquisition, they're as good as dead. No questions asked. No mercy. Gone.

She agreed.

Now Ophelia is sitting on the harsh, cold floor. The bag is still placed over her head as was instructed. Her dress is crumpled. Her hands fidget as she tries to push them through the cuffs.

I think I can hear her cry.

My cock jerks in response to the beautiful sound. I step forward, almost brushing against the bars that separate us.

As my footsteps echo in the space right outside her cell, Ophelia lifts her head. "W-Who's here?"

Me. Only me.

I stay silent for a few beats. Stretching out the torture.

And this is only the beginning of what lies ahead for her.

“I asked who’s there,” she murmurs, backing up on her ass to the wall. “I’ll remove the bag if you don’t say something. I’ll go against your orders if you don’t identify yourself. You can try to kill me, you fucker. I dare you to try.”

She’s adorable, talking through her tears. Threatening me.

“Just us.” I get in, locking both of us inside the cell. The gold key slides smoothly into my pocket.

“James?” She sits up straighter. There’s no relief in her eyes. In her squared shoulders.

Ophelia knows she should fear me.

I fucking love that.

“What are you doing here? They said—” Her voice cracks. She clears her throat. “They said this is it. This is my new home. But it isn’t, right?” I hear hope in her question. This feels like a good outcome for her. She thinks she can manipulate me because I called her a good girl last night. Wrong. “You’re taking me to the person who bought me?”

“Sonnet.” Finally, now that we’re alone, I can call her that without looking over my shoulder. I rip the offensive bag off her head. I have to see her. “I’m the man who bought you.”

Her eyelashes flutter. One last tear trickles from the corner of her eye.

Her cheeks flush.

Then reality sinks in.

Her parted lips curve down into a scowl. She lifts her bound hands to her chest. “No. No one’s bought me. I’m my own person, you bastard.”

I want those lips wrapped around my cock. Want her tears and anger as she sucks me. When I fuck her throat so hard that she cries. When she swallows every drop of my cum.

It’s the only reason why I’m here, really.

The only one, other than punishing her.

My lungs burn. I realize that I’m not breathing. That I’m mad.

She’s managed to put me in a difficult position again.

This need. This longing.

It ends here.

I’m going to strip her of her power. For good.

“Yes.” I make a fist in her hair. Pull her up to her knees. I lean down until we’re face-to-face, watching her glistening eyes. I’ll have more of

these tears. As many as I can coax out of her. “You and me. You’re my property. Bought and paid for.”

With funds from one of my off-shore shell companies, a piece of information I don’t and won’t share with her.

Her brow furrows. “Was Topher in on this?”

Out of every fucking thing she could’ve said, she’s had to bring up my son.

I was upset before. I’m fiercely jealous now.

How dare she ask that.

How dare she do that to me.

“Topher isn’t here.” Pushing her head to the side, I lean in to drag my tongue along her cheek. I savor the taste of her tears. “Doesn’t know you’re here, either. Other than the two people who brought you here, no one does.”

“Why did you do this?” She shivers at my touch, then steels herself when I pull her back to face me. “Why did you bid on me? You could’ve just set me free.”

“I didn’t bid on you. Bidding means I might’ve lost.” Her laden, terrified breaths turn me right the fuck on. Instead of bending her over for a quick fuck that’d ruin the fun, I taste her other cheek. Brush my lips over her ear. Marvel in her tremor. “I do not lose. I bought you. I own you. You’ll do well to remember that.”

“Am I going to die here?” Ophelia blinks furiously. She’s as upset as she’s worried, and these emotions rule her. These emotions cause tears to well in her eyes again. Her body responds to me, and it’s a beautiful thing. “Is that why you bought me? To kill me?”

The kind thing would be to tell the truth.

But I’m not a kind man.

“Maybe. Probably.” I use my thumb to rub a fresh tear off her cheek. Then another. “Don’t worry, though. There’ll be time for that later. After I’m done playing with you.”

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12

OPHELIA

I shouldn't have been surprised when James made his presence known.

While I was dragged down here, I recognized the faint hint of Clara's perfume.

The walk down the stairs wasn't as violent as it had been when James had dragged me down here. Didn't stop me from recognizing the familiar walk to my cell.

She didn't order me to keep the bag over my head. That was the guy who placed the bids on me. I will never forget his voice.

But I suspected I was in James's house.

I was right.

I'm here. James is here.

I had no idea that I'd be sticking around. I thought we were making a short stop here before I was delivered to my bastard owner.

Anxiety soaks my pores, stomping on my survival instincts. On my will to fight, to get out of here. Lust joins it, the fucker.

James is as hot as he is awful.

He's hard in his pants. He said the word *playing* like he'd say *suck me*.

I get so wet from that. Painfully, shamefully wet.

He can't keep evoking these emotions in me. I won't let him win. Ever. "You can't do this to me. I'm not some animal you put in a cage."

"Tell me, Ophelia." His fingers massage my scalp. Soothing me. Lies. It's all lies. My hair is still in his grip. In his tattooed hand that's now

identical to Topher's. He can tug harder anytime he wants. He probably will. "What does ownership mean?"

My heart flutters. Skitters and stops. If I answer, he'll hear my desire for him. It'll be really loud too. The tingle between my legs is torture. The need for him locks my throat. My swollen breasts ache for him.

"Use your words." He dips his chin. "Deny me, and you'll be punished."

Violence bleeds from his eyes. And lust. He's fucked, just like me.

I don't know why he'd pay an obscene amount of money for me. Sure, he'll get some of it back. All of it goes to his cult's bank account. He won't get three-quarters of it back, though.

He's lost so much money. For me.

Could he really want me that badly?

Maybe.

I have no idea what that says about either of us.

I have no idea if I'll ever get out of here. If I'll live long enough to survive his games.

No, I do know. I won't die here. I won't. I refuse to.

Is it really up to me, though?

Doubt gnaws at my sanity. I can't be sure of anything. I might actually die here. He's strong enough to end me.

He might end me here and now if I don't do as he says.

"I'm hungry." Raising my chin when my hair is in his fist is a challenge. It hurts. "How's that for words?"

"Bold. That's what it fucking is." His self-control wavers. His voice rises. His lips twitch.

In an instant, he's back to his old self.

Nothing can get in or out.

Besides me. I made a crack in his walls before. I'll do it again.

"Bold is auctioning unwilling women." He opens his mouth, ready for a rebuttal. I beat him to it. "Except it isn't bold when it comes to you, is it? I saw the police chief there. You know him, and he's okay with your little gang."

"Not a gang." He's bent over to look me in the eye.

He's so strong. So imposing.

I bet, beneath this designer suit, he's all muscle. All power. It's bad to think about it. To crave it. I'm as good as gone if I don't get that picture out

of my head.

“Whatever,” I keep talking back. That’s the only thing that’ll save me from my inconvenient need for him. From fearing him. “Anyway, I wonder what Topher will say when he finds out you were the one who bought me. That you fucked him over.”

“Stop. Talking. About. Him.” Everything he says is calculated. Delivered slowly. Meant to scare me further. Or maybe, just maybe, it’s meant for him. A way for him to stay ahead of the game.

One thing’s for sure. I’ve struck a nerve.

“Who?” I’ve been touched, groped, and motherfucking auctioned today. I’m here with my…owner. I’m attracted to him, for fuck’s sake. So yeah, I grow even bolder. Anything to stop this madness inside my head. I push myself higher until our noses nearly touch. “My ex-boyfriend?”

“This game you’re playing won’t end well for you. You’re way out of your depth here.” Fire within him. Ice coating the outside. “You said you were hungry.”

I wasn’t lying about that. I haven’t had anything to eat since our dinner last night. And no, the toothpaste I swallowed after I was waxed and pampered doesn’t count.

But my weaknesses aren’t his to exploit. “I’m not. I only said it to spite you.”

“You’ll need to eat at some point,” James muses, seemingly nonplussed.

He can tell I’m lying. The games have officially begun, I guess.

“Who will you come to for food then? Tell me.”

“To you, asshole.” I pinch my lips, stopping myself from spitting on him. From getting this sick fuck off. “To the asshole who’ll feed me.”

“Cute.” He shakes my head. I bite back a groan. “Try again.”

I’ve poked him enough. His temper is rising faster than before.

He might kill me for it.

I hate this cell. I don’t want to die here.

Damn it. Two words. I can say two words, and it won’t mean a thing. As long as I get to fight another day.

“My owner.”

“Louder.” Despite being bent over me, I still have a view of the bulge in his pants. His thick cock jerks. I do not wish to touch it. Ever. I don’t. “Louder, Sonnet.”

“My owner.” Keeping my eyes on his as I growl the words is my only way to preserve my dignity. “My motherfucking owner.”

“That’s better.” James moves my head to the side. His lips burn a trail across my jaw. My cheek. It’s hotter than before. More sinful. He stops at my ear. I can hardly hold back my gasp. “I’m going to get my money’s worth right now. Beg me to feed you.”

“I’m not hungry.” My breath hitches. “I won’t beg.”

As soon as I say that, he releases me. Stands up to his full height. Fuck, he’s so tall. So intimidating.

After he takes six measured steps toward the cell door, he turns around, glaring at me. This force of nature exerts his power over every inch of the small space.

“You’re right. Begging isn’t what I’m after. Maybe later it will be.” He adjusts himself in his pants without looking away. Like him being hard is a minor inconvenience. My need for him, though, isn’t an inconvenience. It’s ruining my life. “I recall bringing an end to a particular scene at the auction.”

Crawl.

He’s talking about recreating it.

“No.” As if denying him would do me any good. As if refusing him will make my nipples any less hard. “No.”

“I have the keys to your handcuffs.” I’m drawn to his hand patting one pocket of his pants. “I’ll take them off. I’ll get you the food you’re so desperate for. If…”

A pause. The bastard is making me wait. Making me hope he might change his mind.

“If?” I ask when I can’t take it anymore.

“If you crawl to me.”

“Ha.” I put everything into my fake laugh. “You’re more delusional than I thought.” Fight. Fight. Fight. I have to fight. Even now. Even when he hauls me to my feet by the collar of my dress. “I won’t beg,” I growl, tipping my face up to meet his glare. “Won’t crawl to you. I won’t.”

“Topher would’ve pushed you to your hands and knees. Would’ve forced you.” What he doesn’t say is that he won’t do it. Won’t use his body and strength to demean me.

There are other methods in James Hawthorne’s arsenal.

Creative ones. Hotter ones.

The wrong ones.

“And you?”

I’m being slammed into the wall. James grinds his hips into me. He can’t help it any less than I can silence my moan.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Even my damn hands betray me, my fingers curling to grasp at his shirt.

Fuck.

“Crawl to me.” He slides his hand to my jaw, applying the slightest pressure to angle my head to the right. Pressing his lips to the pulse point in my neck. “Crawl to me, and you’ll eat. Crawl to me, and I’ll go easier on you.”

Goosebumps spread across my skin. A tremor builds at the base of my spine, rising higher and higher.

James smiles against my neck. Parts his lips. Sinks his teeth into my flesh.

“No,” my mouth says. The rest of me says so much *yes*. I arch my back, tilting my head to the side to offer James more of me. “Do whatever you want. Starve me to death. Punish me. I won’t crawl to you.”

“Hmm.” The way he sucks on my skin, I know it’ll leave a mark. “If that’s what you want.” His lips go higher as his free hand bunches my dress up my thighs. “Sweet property like you.”

His tongue swirls around that spot below my ear. His thumb strokes the lips of my pussy through my panties. I think I’m dying. Or I will if he keeps doing this to me. If I come face-to-face with him again.

Oh God, it’s mortifying. I cry from the humiliation, but fuck, it doesn’t stop me from rolling my hips on his hand.

“I need you,” I whisper, shame drenching my voice.

“Crawl.” He breathes hard when he tears himself from me. “And you’ll have me.”

“Please.” God, fuck, why am I so pathetic? Why do I need to come this badly? “Please, James.”

“Better, though it isn’t what I’m aiming for.” His hands are warm on mine as he unlocks the handcuffs. “I’ll be back soon. See if you’ve had a change of heart.”

With the cuffs in his grip, he walks out the door. Flips the lock. Cages me again.

I’m empty. Wet.

Indignant as hell.

“Isn’t that what you paid for?” I scream after him. My hands are flat against the wall at my back. I don’t trust myself to stay upright without its support. These feelings will bring me to my knees. “To fuck the virgin?”

He spins. His face is blank, expression cold. It’s like he’s stripped the emotions from his soul. “Who says I won’t?”

One last look and he’s gone. James is out of sight. Out of reach.

Using what’s left of my strength, I hurl myself forward.

“I hate you.” I wrap my fingers around the cell’s bars. Stick my head out as far as it will go. Tears slide down the metal. “I hate you.”

He walks away as if nothing’s happened.

This jerk. This monster.

This man that I don’t hate at all.

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13

OPHELIA

"Miss Monroe."

Topher's dad was nothing like him. Sure, both men were tall. Both had broad shoulders. Both stood there, in the entryway of Mr. Hawthorne's mansion, wearing dark, expensive suits.

That was where their similarities ended.

I didn't like it that I noticed it. It'd been three months that I hadn't been sure about my feelings for Topher, and yet I noticed his dad from the first moment I laid my eyes on him.

Topher kept asking me out, and I kept saying yes. I believed something would change.

This wasn't the change I dreamed of. The butterflies in my belly. The stars in my eyes.

If I ever needed a sign to end things with Topher, this was it.

Three more weeks. You promised to give him that long to sweep you off your feet.

Whether he did or not, one thing was for sure—I'd never think, dream, or feel anything for his dad.

This was where it ended.

Soft footfalls padding on stone rouse me from this half-sleep state I've been in for…

How long? Who knows?

I sure as hell don't. Without windows or a clock hanging on the wall, I have no way of telling.

No, that’s not true. I do have some sense of how long I’ve been here.

I’ve used the bathroom twice. Dozed off once.

My stomach has been grumbling over and over again. I’ve hugged it and begged for it to stop twice.

Then there’s been this dull, incessant ache between my legs.

Zero—that’s the number of times I orgasmed. It feels dirty to need James so much that I have to touch myself.

This whole place, the auction, the *crawl to me*. He’s been debasing me.

Making myself come will be the final nail in my coffin.

“Sonnet.” He’s behind the bars, one hand holding a bottle of water. The other is carrying a plate.

Holy. Shit. There’s a sandwich on it.

He watches me as I hug my knees closer to my chest. His gaze unnerves me, and I press my back harder to the wall.

“What do you want?” I snarl, my throat dry. I could drunk from the tap, but I won’t. They could be unfiltered. I could die.

Topher would’ve loved that. Maybe James too.

“How have you been?”

I almost laugh at him.

I could’ve been better if I’d tucked myself under the covers. Had I slept in the bed instead of on the floor.

Which would never happen. I’d never allow myself to be comfortable here. Won’t lie and tell myself that this isn’t the worst place ever.

Being here is the worst.

James is the worst.

I hate him.

I think.

I do.

I have to convince myself of that. Cling on to that.

I hate him. I hate him. I hate him.

“Let’s see.” Talking hurts after being denied water. After crying for hours. “I was put on display, auctioned, and sold to my ex-boyfriend’s dad. Ever since I’ve been locked in a cell. Sleep deprived. Food deprived. Orgasm deprived. Life is fucking peachy.”

“Ophelia. You’re looking at this the wrong way.” He raises a thick eyebrow. My accusations have gone right over his head. “You were sold for thirty million dollars. It’s the highest bid we’ve had here.”

The nerve of this man. To say these things to me. To look so good while he humiliates me. He's showered, I notice, refreshed in his blue jeans and gray long-sleeve T-shirt. I won't stare at him too long.

I will definitely not try to guess what he put in that sandwich.

Fuck him and his whole wheat bread and his damp hair that still manages to look perfect.

Fuck. Him.

I put my hand on my chest. Flutter my eyelashes.

"Oh, Jeez. Where are my manners? Mr. Hawthorne, sir, I'm so incredibly flattered. Honored, even. That is, if I forget that I was sold"—my voice rises, my hand balling into a fist—"against"—I'm screaming now —"my will!"

"The last three items you've listed as things you've been denied of earlier, that's on you." More ignoring me. More of his flat tone. More of his dark glare. My thighs remain where they are. They won't clench for him. "You could've slept in the bed. Could've let me feed you. Could've made you come on my fingers. I offered you everything, but you refused."

An animalistic growl bursts past my lips. I don't recognize it. This isn't me. "You're a bastard."

"And you're fucking with my head." Gone is his cool, aloof demeanor. A scary emotion washes over him. He lets it stay this time. Lets me see him. Lets me fear him. "I'd say we're even."

My stomach grumbles, and it's humiliating. I pull my knees closer, hoping it'll silence the sound. Fail.

"You're going to be good." Not a question. A command. A threat. "I'm going to come inside. Then you're going to do exactly as I say."

I have to fight him. Either that or humanize myself in his eyes so he stops this madness. He tucked me in before the auction.

He didn't let the Italian predator buy me. Didn't let Topher humiliate me or hurt me.

A part of him looks at me and sees more than a pretty face. More than a game.

Maybe if I'm good, he'll remember that. Maybe I can even grow to like this side of him.

And maybe if you're bad, he'll kill you. Maybe that's what happened to Topher's mom. He might've killed her.

Either way, I have to gather my strength. I have to eat to survive this.

“I’ll be good.” *I’ll survive this. I’ll survive him.* “What do you want?”

“That’s better.”

With the bottle squeezed into his armpit, he has one free hand to retrieve the gold keys from his jeans pocket. He unlocks the door, closes it behind him, and locks it up again. The keys slide back into his pocket.

I’m wary and insanely curious as he gets closer. His elegant gait. His eyes on mine. How he lowers himself into the bed I refuse to get into.

“Before I left, I ordered you to do something.”

The plate is on the bed. I smell peanut butter. Did Topher tell him it was my favorite snack? I’ll kill him. I’ll destroy him.

Food doesn’t matter. Topher doesn’t matter.

“How long has it been since you left, anyway?”

James takes a moment or two to answer me. Could be a million. His silence is unsettling. His silence makes me wet.

“Okay. I’ll indulge you.” He makes it sound like a gift, and I, sickly, in the most depraved way, light up at this. Then this darkness splashes across his face. He’s mad that I’m leaning closer to him. “Three hours. Couldn’t leave you here for longer than that without food. You need to eat. You will eat, damn it.”

Hope. A sliver of it. He might care for me. In an unconventional way. But still. “Even if I don’t—”

One shake of his head and my mouth slams shut.

“Food and water won’t come for free. Tomorrow, maybe.” He shrugs, and even that movement looks violent. “Depends on how well you behave. On how well you follow orders tonight. How pleased I’ll be by the way you crawl to me. How much of a fight you put up before you finally bend to my will. You will, eventually. Trust me when I say that I’m not leaving here before your stomach is full. The only question is if you’ll be punished for it or not. You don’t want to test my patience. You shouldn’t.”

My first reaction is to shudder. Can’t help it. He’s so severe. So intimidating. His words are teeth sinking into my flesh.

James, my owner, notices. His eyes narrow. Wicked satisfaction lights up in them.

The last time he was here, crawling to him seemed like the worst possible thing that could happen to me. Every cell in my body rejected the idea.

Now, late at night, when I'm exhausted, hungry—and after spending hours here by myself—it doesn't sound as awful. Having him here isn't as terrible. His presence doesn't terrify me.

It…

Fuck.

These feelings for him. I shouldn't be having them, yet here they are.

Right. Fucking. Here.

He can never know that I'm growing attached to him. That a part of me finally admits that I'm relieved that he returned to my cell.

I hoped he never would. Prayed that the next person to come down here would be a man or a woman in a police uniform, they'd hold the literal and metaphorical key to my freedom.

James is here instead. A familiar presence. And he brought me water and food.

He's someone I find comfort in.

Topher, who tricked and betrayed me, wouldn't have given me this sense of strange peace. The buyers in the auction room wouldn't have given two fucks whether I ate or drank or starved to death.

James is here to make sure I'm okay.

I'm not alone. Not whipped or ignored or left here to lose my mind until I'm nothing but a vessel. A bag of skin and bones to be tortured.

But surviving this hell comes with a price.

Doing what he says will humiliate me. Demean me. My soul will crack some more after tonight.

It'll be okay, my mind sends the signal to my worn-out, defeated body. *You might even like it. Being his.*

No, I won't.

I'll do it anyway so I can live to fight another day.

Tears gather in the corners of my eyes. I'm already on my hands and knees.

Deep breath.

"I'll crawl."

"Not so fast." He raises his hand to stop me. "You've made me wait."

I look at him from beneath my lashes. He's quiet. Expecting another thing of me. I don't know what, and my helplessness almost pushes tears out my eyes. I will them to stay there while I try to figure out what it is he wants.

I have to try.

“I’m…” A sick part of me wants to please him. All of me wants to kill him for putting me through this. “Sorry?”

“Cute, but no.” His hands flex on his thighs. Physically, we’re about six feet apart since he sits at the foot of the bed, staring at me. Emotionally, he’s right here, towering over me. “After you crawl, and before you get to touch your food, you’ll suck me.”

Fire flares across my body. My neck heats. My muscles lock up. I thought it couldn’t get any worse. That the humiliation would end when I crawl to him.

Not when I have his cock in my mouth.

My panties are soaked at the idea. That, too, makes me want to weep.

“You can’t be serious. No.” I press my lips into a flat line. It’s either that or I’ll tell him to go to hell. Or I’ll cry again. I don’t want it. To be on my knees for him. For him to take my mouth, whether I consent to it or not.

“What’s this? You’re making me wait again?” The air in the room shifts. It grows hotter. Headier. James sits up straighter. The outline of his erection is evident. “You saw what happens when you do that. How bad I can get. I’m your owner. Nothing is off-limits for me. Not your mouth. Not your pussy. Not your ass. Is that what you’re asking for? For me to take them all tonight?”

Words won’t come out. My heart is in my throat, my lungs twisting painfully.

All I can do is shake my head, silently begging him to forgive me.

“Thought so.” He spreads his legs, just a little, patting his knees. “For the last time tonight, Ophelia. Crawl. To. Me.”

He’s offering cruelty. He’s offering mercy.

I breathe easier at that. Shamefully, I do. I’m drawn to it, to him.

Crawling feels like floating. Like I’m doing the right thing. My knees scrape against the floor. His glare is as cold as it’s always been, and yet…

Arousal soaks my inner thighs. I’m panting with desire by the time I get to him. My skin lights up when I stop in the space between his legs. When I wait for his approval.

He cups my jaw. It’s such a comfort to be held after everything I’ve been through. I almost break down and cry. “Good girl.”

I whimper at the praise. At his touch. I hate myself for it.

I’ll do better once I’ve had some food in my stomach. Once I’ve had a good night’s sleep.

Normally, this isn’t me. But it can be me tonight. Just until tomorrow.

“Take me out.”

The dread I’ve been able to push back returns in full force. He told me this would happen. That I’d have to do it. Now that I’m here, I can’t. He’s huge. I know he won’t be gentle.

I’ve never done this before.

If I like this…

If I get off on this…

There will be nothing left of me.

Nothing.

He’s so close, he has to see that. Has to understand that what he’s asking for has the potential to crush me.

I—Fuck. “Please. I can touch myself.” I sit on my knees, wrestling my dress up my thighs, exposing myself to him. “You can watch. Just don’t—” It’s embarrassing, begging him like this. “Don’t do this.”

“You belong to me.” The grip on my jaw is back, tighter than before. He yanks my face up. Tilts his head to the side. “If I tell you to take me out so I can fuck your mouth, what do you do?”

I shudder. He sticks to his blood-curdling silence, giving me a murderous look that sets my skin on fire.

This is so wrong. This shouldn’t be happening. Least of all with him—my ex-boyfriend’s father.

“Ophelia.”

It is happening.

It is, and I’m scared of the person I’ll become when this nightmare is over.

A person who likes this.

“What I do is take you out and let you fuck my mouth.” Shame floods me as I release my dress and press my hands to his knees. As I gravitate toward him. As he tenses beneath me. “I’ll do it. I’ll be good.”

“That’s my girl.”

My eyes widen in shock. Despite his cold glare, this praise is even more intimate than the one before.

“What did I say about asking again?” He leans back, placing both hands on the bed. His T-shirt stretches across his sculpted body. His lean muscles.

“That if you have to do it, you’ll fuck all my holes.” I fumble for the button of his jeans. He hums in approval.

“Tell me.” His attention is hot and distracting. His dick stretches the material, and it’s a struggle to get the button through the loop. “Have you ever sucked cock before?”

I stop, my jaw dropping. Snapping it shut, I swallow a cry of shame. I don’t want to be here, doing this. I don’t want to look clueless, either. Not in front of him.

“I—” I swallow around the lump in my throat. “He told you?”

All I get is another hum of approval. The view of his cock somehow thickening in his jeans.

It’ll never fit in my mouth. Or in my pussy. Oh God, I won’t—

“That’s it. Roll the zipper down. Ah. Yes.” James guides me through the motions. His confidence is comforting. It’s a fake kind of comfort, I’m aware. I’m taking it, anyway. “Go on. Faster. Show me what my millions paid for.”

James is horrible. A truly awful man. But he didn’t let anyone else outbid him. If he likes me like I think he does, I might find a way into his heart. He’ll bend for me.

It’ll be my ticket out of here.

Although…I have to admit that this isn’t the worst scenario possible.

He praises me. He feels good. His body is tempting in a scary way. A dark way.

I can’t fall for it. Fall for him.

But I know it could’ve been so much worse. I could’ve been in actual pain with another person. Another buyer.

His cock is out of the boxers and in my palm. He’s smooth and hot and hard, throbbing in my hand. My eyes snap up to him, my lips gaping at his reaction to the simple touch.

Icy eyes find mine.

For the longest time, we just exist. Fear and awe beat inside my chest. His jaw tics, and I squeeze him. I can’t help it.

“Ophelia.” His thighs flex, pressing me from either side. Caging me in. “Put your virgin mouth on my cock. Fucking suck me.”

So perverse. Depraved. Sick. And I want it.

Thoughts of humiliation, of the future, of what I’ll be once I get out of here, they’re no more. I need him in my mouth as much as his wet tip needs

my tongue on it.

I could be bad at this. I could be the worst.

I could disappoint him.

Then again, putting him in my mouth will be better than the emptiness I felt over the hours I spent here alone. Better than being punished by having my ass fucked.

“James, we don’t have to do this,” I whisper, hoping to unlock door number three. “You could release me. I could come back for a…date?”

“Properties don’t talk.” His thumb is on the bottom row of my teeth, forcing my lip down.

That’s the final warning before his free hand squeezes the base of his cock. Before he pulls me to the tip by my mouth and thrusts his hips up.

My heart stops. My lungs cease to function. My lips are stretched around the throbbing head. Spit trickles out of the corners of my mouth.

I’m stunned. Shocked. Frozen. Gasping for air.

He forces me, and I like it. A jolt of pleasure zaps through me.

“Do it,” he growls, his salty precum trickling on my tongue. “I said…” He releases his cock and my mouth. Now that both his hands are free, he threads one into my hair. Making a fist of it. “Suck, Ophelia.”

James shoves my head down his length. The tip of it hits the back of my throat, the girth of him stretching my lips.

So good. It’s so bad that it feels good, it just does. I moan. I take him deeper, and I don’t care that I gag. That I rock my hips, fucking the air.

This isn’t what I dreamed it would be. This isn’t the man I thought would take my mouth. Yet it’s so sexy. So perverse to do it in a cell. I shouldn’t be trading blowjobs for food. For my life.

I’m still here doing it. Rolling my eyes with the immense pleasure that’s assaulting my senses.

Tomorrow, I’ll hate it. I’ll wake up after crying myself to sleep. After cursing myself for these feelings that I shouldn’t be having for my captor.

Later.

I can’t help but crave him now.

I.

Can’t.

“Yes. Yes. Like that. Such a greedy whore. Sucking me so fucking good.” His hand guides my head up and down on his dick. He isn’t being gentle. Isn’t teaching me how to do it. My coughing and spit don’t slow

him. He uses me for his pleasure. “Put your hand on your cunt. Make yourself come. Let me feel you scream on my cock.”

I whimper. I’m scared of what it means if I come for him.

I do it, still. I obey him because a sick part of me craves it. My pussy is swollen and wet. I’m hypersensitive by the time my fingers slide between my lips.

When James pulls me back up to shove me back harder down on his cock, I almost come on the spot.

“Such a hot little mouth.” He forces me lower on his dick. Proves to me just how much he owns me. Every inch of him is proof. “Sweet, hot tongue. Look at me, Ophelia. Look at me when you take me down your throat.”

A new wave of tears prickles the corners of my eyes.

This isn’t humiliation. This is lust. I do what he says, though I gag and choke because it gets me that much closer to my own climax. I’m almost there. Almost.

“God. Fuck. Every cent. Every fucking cent I spent…” He bought me. He owns me. I’m his property. I can’t ever forget that. I can’t—Fuck, I like it. I get off on this. “Was worth it.”

His teeth sink into his bottom lip. His cock thickens inside me.

I please him. Out of everything—my fingers on my clit, the taste and feel of him in my mouth—this is the part that sends me over the edge.

Just like he ordered me to do, I cry out. I scream on his cock.

This orgasm is going to split me in half.

“Fuck. Yes. Good—Jesus, good fucking girl.” I ride my hand. He fucks my face more viciously. Faster. “So fucking hot. You’re beautiful. Such a good slut—oh, *fuck*—making me come like this.”

The last word is barely out of his mouth before he finishes in mine. Our eyes are locked as he shoots load after load down my throat.

“Swallow,” he hisses, his teeth gritted. “Suck me dry.”

I try. There’s so much of him, and I’m fighting hard to breathe. It’s hard.

“Yes.” Nothing about him is soft or comforting as he pulls me off him. As his thumb swipes along my lips. He shoves his cum into my mouth. “Take it.”

He tastes good. His thumb feels right on my tongue. It’s the hand with the tattoo on it. His other one holds my nape possessively.

If I weren’t starving and at the end of my rope, I would’ve spat it out. Bitten him.

But I need this. I have to do this.

At least that's what I tell myself.

Somewhere between the moment he walked into my cell and now, the lines have blurred.

I refuse to think about it a second longer.

"Mine." I'm past arguing. Past pushing him away. I just need food. Just need some sleep. Then I'll remember why this place and this man are the worst. "I own you."

I blink once.

"You're learning." James's thumb strokes my nape, his face unreadable. "I'm proud of you."

My orgasm hasn't wiped out my last brain cell. He might be praising me. He's done it before.

Doesn't mean I'm any less of a captive.

A surviving captive.

One who, I think, has made the tiniest crack in his heart.

What terrifies me is that there's a fissure in mine as well.

I can't concentrate, can't go back to being myself when he takes up so much space.

"Thank you," I whisper from my place on the floor.

"I promised to reward you for being good." He tucks himself in. Reaches over to where he left the food and water, dragging them over. Leaving them at his side, close. Frustration raises a scream in my throat that I won't let out. "You were. Eventually. But…"

He leans in. His silence is deafening. Bone-chilling. I'm stuck in place, unable to do anything except watch him slide his hand down my body. Under my panties.

I gasp when he dips two fingers into my pussy. I half-expect, half-wish that he'll make me come again. On his fingers this time.

Thankfully, he spares me from having another reason to hate myself. James pulls them out.

Then, because he can, he shows me there are more ways to humiliate me than just making me come.

He pushes them past my lips, rubbing my orgasm on my tongue.

"Taste yourself." Back and forth they go, smearing my juices on me. "Suck."

Arguing is useless. When I finally clamp my lips around him, I'm not sure I should argue at all. He isn't aggressive, doesn't shove his fingers so deep that I gag.

Whatever this is, it bathes me in warmth. I stop thinking. Stop analyzing and plotting and just suck.

"You'll take what I give you." He leaves my mouth empty, cupping my cheeks in his two firm hands. "Say you understand."

"Y-yes."

"Good girl," he murmurs against my lips. Steals my breath away by pressing his lips to mine, being harsh and demanding as he coaxes my mouth open.

His tongue swipes along mine, and he groans at his taste. At my orgasm.

Our orgasms.

"Keep your mouth open for me." He pops the cap off the bottle and fills his mouth with water.

Nothing about him suggests that we shared a mind-numbing kiss just now.

Why do I even care how he feels about this?

Water. I should focus on the fact that I'm about to take my first drink in hours.

James grabs my chin. His thumb on my bottom lip, pulling it down. My lips parted, James spits the water from his mouth to mine.

"I'll show you how merciful I can be when you behave." James tips the bottle to his lips and takes another sip. Two of them.

His eyes are always on me. He doesn't swallow.

I'm leaning closer when he does, impatient and needy. For the water. Not for him. It's impossible to be wet from a man letting me drink by spitting water into my mouth.

He isn't just any man, though.

He's my owner.

I must be high. Endorphins must be swarming through my blood. Distorting my common sense.

This has to be why I dig my fingers deeper into his thighs. Tip my head even higher. Sway closer the more water laps at my tongue and goes down my throat.

I swallow it hungrily. My eyes delve deeper into his soul. I can't squeeze them shut, can't imagine looking anywhere else.

He’s beautiful. He’s a nightmare. And I am…

I’m…

His.

“That’s a good girl.” His voice is rough. He swipes the back of his tattooed hand over his mouth, then presses it to my lips. “Lick.”

Without hesitation, I dart my tongue out, wiping him clean. I’ll try to make sense of why I like it later. For now, I let myself want this.

“We’re not done.” The sandwich is in his hand. I’m salivating for it. For him to feed me. I’m sick, sick, sick. I’m aware of that, and yet I open my mouth, waiting for him to place the food there. “Eat.”

The bite he’s giving me is a small one. A manageable one.

He could’ve been crueler than this. Could’ve shoved the bottle down my throat. Could’ve stuffed food into my mouth and laughed as I choked on it.

He hasn’t done either.

God, the food is delicious. Heaven. In fact, I’ve never had a better peanut butter sandwich in my life. I moan around the bite. I cry as I swallow.

This goes on for several minutes. He feeds me. Tells me to chew. To swallow. Between bites, he drinks from the bottle and spits it into my mouth.

Until half of the sandwich is gone. Until I’m a moaning, writhing, sobbing mess, clinging to his thighs. “Please. More.”

No one’s had a more depraved meal than the one I’ve just had. No one.

“Enough. Move back.”

I bite the inside of my cheek when James gets up. I don’t—I won’t—show him I need him to stay. That during the time he’s been here, he’s weakened my resolve.

Being left alone with my thoughts would be torture.

After a long, charged beat, he cocks his head. “You don’t hate me.”

“I do.” Nothing about my weak voice sounds convincing. The pull between us is too powerful for me to lie. “You’re a bastard. I hate you so much.”

“You don’t.”

“I—”

His disapproval is a force.

My head bows on its own. “I don’t hate you.”

James makes a sound at the back of his throat.

“You’ll get under the covers. Immediately. That’s where you’ll sleep. That’s where you’ll wait for me. Understood?”

He seems to hate it when I hesitate. I look up to see his mouth pressing into a fine line, and then I’m off the floor. In his arms.

“I will know if you get up for anything other than using the bathroom, Ophelia.” He deposits me in the bed and pulls the duvets up to my shoulders. “I’ll know, and it’ll upset me. Greatly.”

The consequences of his anger hang in the air between us.

“I hate you,” I whisper as loud as my clogged throat allows.

“You don’t.”

Whatever.

Tomorrow, my mind will be clear.

Tomorrow, I’ll fight him.

Tomorrow, I won’t be as desperate for him.

I won’t obey anymore.

I won’t.

I. Won’t.

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14

JAMES

Gray light filters into my kitchen. Heavy raindrops tap against the glass windows in a consistent rhythm.

Some families—who aren't us—will be celebrating Thanksgiving together soon. Heavier rain will patter on their roof. Their windows. Their front porch.

Harsh, then soft. Fast, then slow. Sleet will come down. Possibly snow.

The weather, however flimsy it may be, remains reliable.

There was a time when I considered myself reliable. I could always trust myself to react exactly how I had for decades.

I'm not so sure of it anymore. With Ophelia in my home, I'm beginning to question myself.

It should be impossible for me to change. To look at her as a person, rather than an object to use. The fact that I might've never considered her as property in the first place rattles me.

The floor is warm under my bare feet as I walk over to the sink. The house is quiet, other than the rain outside and the water I use to rinse my coffee mug before placing it in the dishwasher.

This is the third morning I've woken up in my bed, knowing she's in her cell. Two floors below me. The second morning of having a house with no staff milling about. No work emails. Not having to threaten other people over the phone.

Just me and Ophelia.

And my goddamn feelings.

My lips twist at the notion. I’m incapable of having any emotion other than hate or lust for power.

Haven’t been, at least.

Then Ophelia became mine.

Last night, she was so good. So obedient. Much more after that first night when she’d fought me.

I rewarded her by rubbing her into five orgasms, edging her each time until she cried. I fucked her throat. Fed her. Spat water in her mouth.

That wasn’t anything new.

What changed was her final words to me before I left.

She didn’t say she hated me. Didn’t flutter her eyes shut and sunk into the bed, wishing me away.

She lay under the covers where I put her, staring at me, seeing through me.

There was something on her mind. Something that piqued my curiosity. I wanted to drag it out of her. Torture it out of her.

What was it?

I didn’t ask. Refused giving her the upper hand.

But damn it, she intrigued me. Taunted me.

The pull to her will be the end of me.

I slam the dishwasher door shut. That uncontrolled anger spikes inside me again. Has me clenching my fist.

Fucking her. Breeding her. Of course these are the reasons I’m doing this.

A huff of a laugh bursts past my lips. Sounds as harsh as a cough.

With Topher’s mom, the process was easy.

She chased me around on campus. The med student had five years on me, but she was persistent. By then, I had already been initiated into my father’s organization.

I was repulsed and disgusted by the next step I was forced to take. I despised the idea of forcefully breeding a woman.

Except I couldn’t kill my father just yet.

I couldn’t kidnap Faye, either. When I took her out on a date to tell her I had no other choice, she smiled. She begged me to do it. Was adamant that it would be okay as long as we kept it between us.

She gave me her consent.

Relief didn’t wash over me at that. I was already responsible for the disappearances of Oliver’s and my sacrifices. No one had reported them missing, as I suspected.

Putting a child in Faye and saving her would’ve been more complicated.

Eventually, I had it figured out.

The solution was a simple one.

Until it wasn’t.

Ophelia isn’t her. Nothing like her or anyone I’ve ever met.

She’s different. *I* am different around her.

Her dark eyes. Her beating heart. Her personality that keeps changing and drawing me in.

Maddening.

The other mug on the granite counter taunts me. Her mug.

I had a plan for today. I’d come down here after my workout, make her coffee. Let her drink water from my mouth. Feed her.

Hear her tell me, of her own volition, that she doesn’t hate me.

And I haven’t given up on the idea of hearing her beg.

Goddamn rain. I can’t think straight like this. Can’t focus with the drops on my window that look so much like her tears.

My dick thickens, pushing against my jeans.

Concentrate.

She was about to say something else last night. I crave it. I need it.

I’m about to burst out of my skin.

I have to make it stop. Have to remind myself that she’s nothing to me.

Her tears are nothing.

Her *thank yous* are nothing.

The way she fights then bends for me.

Nothing.

There will be no feeding and orgasms this morning. No soft touches to even out the cruelty.

For my sake, I have to remind myself of who I am.

My phone lights up on the counter. Topher. After days of radio silence.

After over twenty-four hours that she hasn’t mentioned his name.

I slam my fist on the counter. No more of this. Of caring about her. Of this obsession.

I have to dehumanize her. Have to minimize the control she has over me. Eliminate it.

Before that, my son.

Topher: *You up?*

Me: *Yes.*

Short and to the point. I haven't told him I have Ophelia here. I may never say it to him. Soon enough, she'll be gone.

No.

Topher: *Busy? Kinda need to talk to you.*

He never asks if he can call. Something's wrong. I might not be the best father figure, but he knows he can call at any time.

After all, he is my son. My only son.

Until—

"Silence," I bark at the empty house. My voice bounces off the walls.

I can't talk to him when I'm drowning in her. I have to silence the noise in my head. Put Ophelia in her place.

Once things are back in order, I'll talk to him. Clearly, he's unharmed. Alive.

Whatever he wants isn't urgent.

Me: *I'll call you later.*

Topher: *K.*

A derisive laugh huffs out of me at that. My father wouldn't stand for *K*. He wouldn't stand for drunk texts and debasing the initiation, either.

The prick.

"Get up." He towered over me, hands on his waist.

I looked up at him from the floor. Ignoring the throbbing pain in my ribs, I snarled at him.

My growth spurt only started at seventeen, two years later. Until then, he was bigger. Taller. Stronger. Didn't matter how many hours I'd spent in the gym. How much muscle I'd gained.

I might've been a replica of him with our matching dark hair and cold blue eyes.

Back then, though, he had a few inches on me. A grown man's power.

For years, he'd had an advantage over me. Punched my ribs. Kicked my stomach. Beat the shit out of me while making sure no one could see the bruises.

"Get the hell up. You're my son. Stop acting like a wounded, pathetic animal."

“Fuck you.” Every part of me wanted to stand up and fight back. Refusing him felt better. “I’m done listening to you, do you hear? Fuck. You.”

“Goddamn crying baby.” His dress shoe connected to my arm. Then another kick landed on my bruised ribs. He raised his tattooed hand, fisting it—a demonstration of power. “What are you thinking, lying there, taking it like some weak fuck? How do you plan on taking over our firm? Ruling over our empire? Hmm? Answer me.”

At the time, I had no idea why an attorney would have to be a violent monster. When I turned twenty, I understood.

By then, I loathed him and everything he stood for.

He kicked me again, the force of the blow flipping me over my back. Just so I wouldn’t forget he was there, he stepped on my ribs, leaning his weight on top of me.

I snarled.

“Answer me.”

I’ll do all that and more, old man. And by the time I’m done, you’ll be long gone.

“Answer.” Kick. *“Me.”*

“You’ll see, sir,” I spat out. “You’ll see.”

Unlike me, Topher never took a beating in his life. Nothing remotely close to it.

Somehow, he grew up to be more violent than I’ll ever be. The way he treated Ophelia was the last straw.

He’ll have to learn to tame those urges.

I won’t stand for it.

What I’m doing to Ophelia isn’t the same. I own her. She’s my pet. She thanks me when I shoot my cum down her throat.

She’s stopped hating me.

Problem is, she still has a modicum of control over me.

That part drives me insane.

It has to end before I can set her free.

I will never set her free.

The voice in my head is insistent.

Another reason I need to take care of my little problem in the cell.

Pocketing my phone, I head over to my den, getting my rope.

I moved it from my room down here last night when I couldn’t sleep. I had no intention of using it on her so fast. Thought that I was in control of my urges. Of her.

I was wrong.

I need her out of my head.

Her punishment for seducing me can’t wait.

Down the stairs I go, taking two at a time.

There’s order in my life. I have to reclaim it.

“James.” She’s already up when I arrive. Under the covers, doing what she was told.

Being a temptation. A distraction.

I say nothing. Flip the lock. Enter the cell.

“Hi.” Her voice is hoarse from sleep. It speaks straight to my cock.

I still stick to my silence.

It’s then that she notices today’s going to be different. Her large brown eyes run over my body. My dark, long-sleeved T-shirt. The rope in my hand.

“No food?” With a furrowed brow, suspicion paints her voice. “A rope?”

“Up.”

“No.” She raises her voice, pulling the duvet up and over her body. Her fight is another temptation that I ignore. “You can’t keep torturing me. Or if you do, it can’t get any worse. I won’t let you do this to me.”

“Is that so?” I’m a prick for mocking her. For doing it for no apparent reason. It doesn’t help me in the slightest. I don’t feel any less drawn to her when I’m being cruel. The desire to get into that shitty bed and cradle her is intense. “You didn’t look so tortured last night when you came on my fingers.”

The flush on her face is crimson red. “You bastard.”

“Come here.” I’m done waiting. I yank her up and out of the bed, wrapping one arm around her waist. Pinned to my body, she screams and punches me. “Lying doesn’t suit you. I was the one who wiped your dripping pussy clean for the last two days. Had to bring six clean pairs of panties because you ruined yours. You moan when I spit into your mouth.”

“I hate you so much.”

“I wish I could actually torture you. Wish you could suffer for fucking with my head like I suffer.”

God, this new feeling is hell. Loathing. I loathe myself for the things I say. Acting as if the things we've done mean nothing to me.

They do mean something.

They shouldn't.

This fascination with her has to stop.

"I hate you!" she screams in my ear. Tears at my hair. "What the hell is wrong with you? I hate you!"

You're what's wrong. Wanting you is wrong.

"We're back to this again?" Thank fuck we are.

"You're insane."

I tighten my grip around her waist as she thrashes against me. As I loop the rope around the hook that hangs off the ceiling.

"Stop." Ophelia's screams have turned into agonized cries. Probably from how easily I tie her wrists together. "James. Please, stop. I'll be good. You asked me to be good the other night, right? I'll be good. I promise. Please."

Hugging her. Filling her with babies. Stuffing her mouth with my cock.

Any of these scenarios would be better than what I'm about to do.

But then, she'd come out on top. She'd manipulate me.

"You say you will, but we both know you're a liar, Ophelia." We're face to face. Her toes are up in the air. Makes it easier for her to kick me, despite her promise to be good. "You can't help being bad."

I graze her cheeks, the gentle touch of my knuckles on her soft skin is delicious.

"A temptation." Before I lose myself to her, I let my rage win over. I pull on the rope, lifting her another inch off the ground. "Your plan to ruin me won't work."

She gasps. The urge to get her on her knees and have her suck me is strong.

I'm fucking stronger.

"What are you talking about?" Her eyebrows rise. "What happened?"

Playing innocent. She does it exceptionally well. Even her gaze seems confused.

Lies.

From the moment we brought her down here, Ophelia has been plotting against me.

She won't win. I won't get attached to her. I won't change for her.

I am not weak.

“Have any idea why you’re here?” If she can play mind games, so can I. “Know who the last woman I held captive was?”

“Do I look like I care?” She kicks me. Wants to spit on me. I can see it on her face. But after I licked it off my hand—fuck, it tasted good—she stops herself.

I cup her cheek. I wish I could cup her pussy. Sink my cock into her.

I have to break her first, to snap this hold she has over me.

Only then will I fuck her. I’ll do it until she’s as miserable as I am now.

My phone rings in my pocket. Whoever the fuck it is can try again later.

This is important. Crucial.

It’s everything.

“You’re here—” I start.

The phone goes back to ringing. Won’t stop.

“Your empire needs you,” she spits out. “Mr. Sadist Captor.”

She’s beautiful when she submits to me. She turns me right the fuck on when she fights. I grab her chin. Yank her face to mine.

“Owner, Ophelia.” I lean in, licking the corner of her mouth. Her soft cheek. “I’m your owner.”

“What happened? Why are you like this again? ‘I-I don’t want y—”

I glower at her. She stops to think before lying to me and herself.

“Things haven’t been horrible between us. I’ve done everything you’ve asked me to. And you haven’t been—you’ve been rational. You haven’t been *this*.”

“*Things haven’t been horrible*.” Despite mimicking her, I know she’s right. I’d go as far as to say I’ve been enjoying myself. And therein lies the problem. “I told you there was a reason for your presence here. Exchanging orgasms? Your consent? That’s not it.”

“Consent. As if that’s ever been on the table.” She laughs, and it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Can properties consent to anything?”

The phone won’t stop ringing. Motherfucker.

I can’t leave her like this. I can’t leave her at all. My heart is about to pound out of my chest. If I stop now, if I take her down and walk away, I’ll lose my nerve. I’ll take her in my arms. Try to be human for her.

She growls when I shake her head.

“Why, then?” Her voice is louder than the incessant ringing of the phone.

“Be quiet.” I take my phone out. Her eyes light up. “Ophelia, I’m warning you. The smallest sound. Any cry for help. So help me, I will kill you on the spot. It’ll be so easy to snap your neck. So. Easy.”

I won’t kill her. Wouldn’t dream of it.

Ophelia, however, believes me. She pretends to be brave. The quickening of her breaths gives her away. “Will you untie me if I promise to be quiet?”

Fuck no. “I won’t end your life. Good enough incentive?”

Her teeth sink into her plump bottom lip. Eyes flaring. “Fine.”

“Good girl.” Damn it. I shouldn’t praise her, though I keep doing it every single time I’m here. Her taunting smile proves to me how wrong it is. I ignore her, taking the call without looking at the screen. “What?”

“Mr. Hawthorne?” Griffith’s timid voice comes on. “You asked me to call back when I completed the…uh…assignment you gave me. Your specific orders were to call you until you picked up?”

Sure as fuck they were. Because of her.

Another prime example of how Ophelia messes with my head just by existing. Why I’m being cruel so I could stop wanting her this bad.

“Is he happy with her?”

He. Alessandro.

While he looked genuinely pleased at the auction, I refused to leave anything to chance. Preferring to remain anonymous, I told Griffith—who’s still scared shitless of me—to call Starlee.

The anonymous buyer had another order from the auction house. A gift to Alessandro. Her best woman, no matter the cost.

Whoever she was, she should’ve wiped out the memory of Ophelia from his head.

I can’t risk having him search for her.

My girl and her deepest dark eyes. The woman who watches me as if she can’t decide whether she wishes me dead or if she needs my head between her legs.

My temptation. My ruination.

Mine.

“Very much, Mr. Hawthorne, sir.” A baby cries in the background. Griffith shushes him as if the sound alone would summon the boogeyman into his living room. “Your men are keeping watch, as per protocol. The woman is unharmed. Anything else I can help you with?”

“Report back to me if anything changes.” If Alessandro gets bored with the woman I sent him. If he sniffs around, looking for Ophelia. “Understood?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Good.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Haw—”

I end the call. Shove my phone into my back pocket.

“Let me down.” Her pulse continues to beat wildly. I can tell, now that I have my hand wrapped around her throat. Her voice, though, is even. “Let me the fuck down.”

I ignore her. Ignore my throbbing cock. The need that’s burning me alive.

I pour metaphorical ice on my overheated body and face her.

“Ophelia. Now, where were we?”

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15

OPHELIA

Some people are monsters. One hundred percent cruel, evil, neglectful monsters. They'll call you names or punch you for no reason whatsoever. Do everything in their power so you know you mean nothing to them.

They'll never show kindness or compassion to anyone. No softness will ever shine through when they look at you, simply because it doesn't exist within them.

I met those people during my years in foster care.

James isn't a monster, as much as he likes to pretend otherwise.

He's rough and cruel. Cold and careless.

Deep down, he has a soft spot for me.

And I…

I hate him.

I also…

Fuck.

The manhandling. The torture. The humiliation. Sucking him off and letting him force one orgasm after another out of me in exchange for food and water. As a way to stay on his so-called good side.

My hatred for him has been dying out one visit at a time.

Our routine has the unfortunate effect of grounding me. Of calming me.

They've been growing on me.

He has been growing on me.

More than growing on me. Much more than that.

Butterflies flutter in my tummy whenever I hear his footsteps approach. Being fed by him, being at his mercy, gets me hot for hours after he leaves my cell. In the short time I've been here, I've been anxiously looking forward to his visits.

As sick as it is.

I don't have it in me to truly hate him.

Even now. Even when he's squeezing my throat mercilessly. When everything about him promises violence.

I want him.

I'm so, so very fucked.

Because I'm getting attached to him. And he might—who am I kidding, probably will—end up killing me.

What a cruel joke. I was about to break up with Topher because he wouldn't fuck me.

James will most likely do it soon. He'll give me what I want from him and no one else.

After that, we'll be done. I'll be done.

Burned to ashes. Buried in an unmarked grave in his backyard. Thrown into the ocean.

Any of the options sounds plausible when it comes to him.

Yet I can't stop craving this man. Needing this monster like I've never needed anyone else in my life.

Who am I? What have I become?

"You were about to let me down." My toes dangle in the air. Shoulders burning. I'm at his mercy. I'm still making demands. He can't take away my hard-earned privileges like food and water. "This isn't part of our routine. Let me down."

"You haven't showered in days."

Humiliation is a slap across the face.

That asshole. I smell bad because of him, and he has the nerve to be disgusted by it. Well, guess what? I won't be shamed for it.

Hell. No.

I cut my eyes to his crotch. Back to him. "Your cock doesn't seem to mind."

"That's a given. Fucking your forbidden, virgin cunt is all I could think of since the moment I saw you." His fingers dig deeper into my skin,

hurting me. His words sink into my soul. “For the record, you smell fine. I’m giving you a shower for your own benefit.”

James leans into my armpit, darts his tongue out, and licks me.

Fucking licks my armpit.

I moan instead of laugh. I lift my legs to lock them around his hips instead of kicking him.

My mind tries to wrap around this swift change in him while I watch him.

James is far less troubled by it, tying the rope to the hook. Probably so he won’t have to hold on to the end of it to keep me up in the air.

Another way to hurt me.

“No, no, no,” I whine while my heels sink into his ass. “Please.”

He’s bad news. The last thirty minutes have made him even meaner. Whatever he’s about to do to me will be worse than what he’s done so far. I have to stop him.

“You said…” My throat tightens at the feel of James’s knuckles on my collarbone. Of his fingers hooking into the neckline of my dress.

“Yes?” One pull, and the lacey material rips.

This is my cue to talk faster. Which is really hard when all I can think of is being back to our routine. Being on my knees for him. Drinking from his mouth. Taking his cock and—

Quiet.

“Before, you asked if I knew why I was here.”

He stops tearing my dress, his fingers hot on the skin above my navel.

“Tell me. Right this minute. The real reason, other than you being a kidnapping psycho.” Demanding anything of James Hawthorne is dangerous. Out of the two of us, he’s the dominant one. He’s in control. But I need to understand him. Need him to see me as a person. He liked our time together. I’m sure he did. He can’t kill me if he likes me. “Why am I being held here?”

A wicked smirk spreads on his face. Slow and deliberate. He lets me watch this terrifying change in him. He hardly ever smiles, smirks, or does anything other than scowl. This can’t be good.

“Scaring me makes you feel like you’re in control over the situation, right?” My chin wobbles. My voice cracks. My legs grow weak, and I release my grip on him. “Well, congratulations.” My dress is gone. He’s torn it all the way down while I was talking. “Mission accomplished. I’m

terrified. Now, can we please return to the way things were before? Just don't kill me. Please."

The deep breath he sucks in is an omen. A sign for me to prepare for the worst.

"The reason you're here is…" He's talking, but he doesn't answer my question. Doesn't tell me if it's a control thing.

He shows me it is by brutally ripping the straps of my dress, shoving them and the rest of the fabric off my body.

I've disturbed him. Shaken his self-control somehow.

He's here to reclaim it.

"Is the same reason Topher's mom was locked in a cell in my father's house over twenty-one years ago."

I have no idea why she was there. What I know is he's lying. To me. To himself, I think.

Why?

Doesn't matter.

He's done answering, it seems like. He has his belt out, looped around his hand.

A shiver runs down my spine. I point my feet, flex my muscles. Anything to stop the tremors.

The stretch in my shoulders is becoming intolerable. My abs contract as I'm trying to alleviate the pressure, and it helps. A little.

Nothing will help me against this threat.

The most alluring man I've ever met.

Fucking your forbidden, virgin cunt was all I could think of since the moment I saw you.

Does that mean he feels the same way I feel about him? That I might not die here after all?

His face. His predatory movements. His words. I have to look closely.

Studying him is how I survive this. No other way.

"Who was she?" I'm desperate for information that might keep me alive.

And I'm jealous of her.

I hate it. My stomach lurches, my body informing me it's rejecting the strange emotion.

"You shouldn't be jealous." I hate that he can read my mind even worse.

He takes a step back, and I have a full view of him. Broad shoulders. Muscles that stretch the material of his T-shirt. Jeans that fall on his tapered waist. Another woman had that. Another woman gave him a son.

Another dead woman.

Oh.

Oh no.

"Am not." *I'm not, I'm not, I'm really not.*

"Life didn't pan out for her the way she imagined it would."

"I said." Being hung like this should put me at a disadvantage. I'm weaker, at his mercy. I raise my voice at James anyway. "I'm not jealous."

He tips his head to the side in a gesture that says *Bullshit*.

Motherfucker. He doesn't have to be this handsome when he's calling me a liar. Before he kills me like he must've killed *her*.

"As to your question about her identity." The leather of his belt makes an obscene sound as it smacks on his other hand. "She was a med student. Smart and objectively good-looking. A nobody."

That jealousy rises like a tidal wave claiming my body. Curls around my lungs. I growl in annoyance.

James, tall and infuriatingly blasé, paces the floor in front of me. Paces behind me until I have to turn my head to see him.

"Objectively good-looking, Ophelia," he repeats. "But *I* wasn't attracted to her."

Crack!

Fire shoots up from my ass, reaching behind my eyes. They squeeze shut, my head bowing back as the sharp pain slices through me.

"You belted me! Monster!" I scream.

"Questioning me…" *Crack!* "Lying to me…" *Crack! Crack!* "Taking over my sanity the way you do…"

Another two blows to my ass. Four to the backs of my thighs.

I think I'm going to faint. My vision blurs around the edges. The air I breathe burns my lungs.

"I…hate…you," I whisper.

A hand tugging my hair pulls me out of my near blackout.

"Sonnet." His lips are on my shoulder. His light scruff is silk compared to the ache in my ass. "This pain. This confusion. That's what you do to my heart. That's what I meant when I said that you messed with my head. I'm willing to bet you already knew. I can't let you have it. We are not equals. I

don’t *feel* the things you insist that I feel. So you’re going to stop all of that right now. You’re my property. That’s it.”

I can’t stop what I can’t control, I think.

Then it’s, *Go fuck yourself. I hate you. You’re a bastard.*

So many words. Accusations. Fury.

None of them come out. Because of the things he just said. Because his free hand rubs and soothes the tormented flesh of my ass.

“James.” Something so bad shouldn’t feel this good. I’m dripping for him. My nipples are pulled tight. I angle my head toward him, leaning into him. My sadist. My only comfort in this hell I’m in. “This is fucked up. You’re fucked up.”

“Never said I wasn’t.” A squeeze of my ass follows his confession. Where he belted me. I bite my lip to silence the howl. Can’t hold back the tears, though. “That’s who I am. That’s all I’ll ever be.”

He’s lying again. To both of us.

There are many facets to this man. Hidden sides that he himself isn’t aware of. He’s had to be this person, this monster, for years. But when his lips trace a soft trail up my neck, I see what he can’t. When he licks the tears on my jaw, I know.

I. Know.

“Topher told me she died.” Goosebumps rake along my skin as the words roll past my lips.

He rips himself from me, taking his warmth with him. A series of four *cracks*, two on each butt cheek follows.

I refuse to sob. To let my breath hitch.

Sadly, the stream of tears down my cheeks won’t stop, no matter what.

“You’re here to listen, not ask questions.” Lust. I hear it in his rugged voice. Feel it in his hand on my waist. “I own you. I control you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

He’s insane. Sadistic. A terrible, terrible person.

I’ve been surviving him.

I’ve been falling for him.

He’s my light. What’s been keeping my heart warm over the past couple of days.

The sight of him entering the cell. Having him take care of me. His rough thrusts that shove his cock deeper into my mouth.

This man is the worst, and he isn't.

Right now, he's struggling, and I'm going to help him. No matter how much it hurts. Regardless of what it says about me.

"Again." *Crack!* "Say you understand."

His voice. His attention. The pain that transforms into pleasure.

If he takes my panties off, if he spreads my legs now, there'll be no hiding the evidence of my arousal.

I'm not sure I want to hide it.

"I understand." My scream is more of a whisper. There's not much left in me to offer him, but I try. "I understand."

The belt drops on the floor with a *thunk* of metal and leather on stone. James shoves my panties to the floor before stalking out, turning into the hall, and disappearing.

"Don't go." Another useless whisper. I need him. Can't he see that? Or…maybe he does. Maybe this is another torture method. "Don't leave me."

"Not leaving." He's back inside. The sleeves of his T-shirt have been rolled up his lean forearms, and he's holding a hose.

Another item I missed on my way here, just like the hook above my head.

"What's this?" I thrash against my binds, getting absolutely nowhere. I have to stop him. Have to get him talking so he won't use it on me. "What happened to Topher's mom?"

James's eyes have gone from blue to almost black.

"Later," is all I get before a warm stream hits my pussy.

"What—Oh, oh. *Fuck*."

This is hell. This is heaven.

I've been wiped clean with a washcloth for days. This is real water. Warm. On my pussy, that's aching to be touched.

Fuck right or wrong. Fuck how embarrassing this is. Fuck being afraid of him. Of one of the most dangerous men in the world.

Fuck.

It.

Life hasn't offered me many pleasures. I'll probably never make it out of here alive.

But I have this man here, sick and adamant about making me come.

I'm taking it.

I part my legs. James takes a couple of steps toward me.

“You’re the worst, Ophelia. Being so good. So tempting.” He raises and lowers the hose. Circles my clit with it. Water splatters on the floor. Behind me. On him. Maybe even on my bed. I’ll worry about it later. “The stream is parting your pussy for me. Your legs are spread. You moan for me. Beautiful. Oh, no, no. I won’t have that. Look at me when I’m talking to you.” His fingers are on my chin. The water blasts my pussy relentlessly. “Look. At. Me.”

My eyes flutter open. I didn’t even notice I closed them. It hurts to be caught in his intense gaze. It almost sends me over the edge.

“That’s it.” He’s so close. The water must soak through his jeans, and he’s still there. His hand moves to my hair, tugging on it. “Such a—Fuck, so good. My good girl. Come for me.”

I don’t understand him. I don’t. How am I his good girl again?

“Come.” He pushes the hose until the plastic presses against my pussy. “For.” He tilts it up, and *oh God*. “Me.”

My fingers dig into the rope. My entire body strains. Coming like this should be impossible. Yet I do. My climax is a freight train slamming into me at a million miles an hour. It knocks the wind out of me. Wipes out every conscious thought in my head.

James is on me in a second. His lips are on mine, cruel and demanding, kissing me back to life.

He swallows my moans. Steals my breaths. Bites and licks me, driving me further into…where?

The road of no return. That’s where.

“James, I’m going to…” I’m fading away. “I’m going to…”

“You’re going to be fine. I have you.”

Those are the last words I hear. His arms around me are the last thing I feel.

Right before I black out.

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16

OPHELIA

I'm swimming in a sea of cotton candy. Wedging my body through the sticky yet soft waves.

Weird.

When I open my mouth to take a bite, I notice this isn't what cotton candy is supposed to taste like.

The candy my dad bought me when I was a kid was sweet, not bland. Its color was pink instead of black. When we wandered through the county fair, we didn't walk *through* cotton candy. I held it in my hand.

What is this?

Where am I?

Far away from home.

The realization swoops over me, a wave crashing me to shore.

I haven't been to my apartment in a while. I'm not four, either. This isn't a county fair.

Mom and Dad's hands aren't gripping mine as we stroll through the stands.

I'm lying down in a bed that isn't mine.

My eyes are glued shut. Exhaustion does that. Weighing me down.

I'm navigating through the fog of deep sleep. I'm trying to climb out of it.

There's no telling how long I've been under. Feels like a long time.

Feels like I needed it desperately.

I'm so tired that my limbs won't work.

You’re not safe here.

This is my second conscious thought.

And I believe myself. I act accordingly too. No sudden movements. No screaming that would give away the fact that I’m awake.

I have to remember what happened to me. Why I’m here.

I do.

Topher and his dad locked me in a cell. Baylor. The auction. His dad bought me. His dad brought me back to the cell. He’s been torturing me there. Taking care of me there.

He’s been mean and cruel. He’s been my only human connection during my time in captivity.

Truth is, he’s been the only person to look after me in a really long time. In his cold, unhinged way, he’s given me what no one has since my parents were alive.

He’s not safe.

He still has secrets. I passed out before he could finish his story. Either that or he would’ve told me it was none of my business.

This is the real problem, isn’t it? When he doesn’t feel like sharing, he closes off.

He’ll keep things from me, and I won’t know what I’m going up against until it’s too late.

Putting my life in this madman’s hands isn’t just a risk. It’s a suicide mission.

Sure, he hasn’t killed me. Yet.

He hasn’t been interested in my consent, either.

Then again, he didn’t like it when I told him I hated him.

Ugh, I’ll go crazy if I think about it for another second. Worse still, these thoughts won’t be what gets me out of here.

Wherever *here* is.

What is this room, exactly?

Sure as fuck doesn’t feel like the bed in my cell. The sheets are too soft. The bed is too warm.

Where did James put me now?

I’m still in the mansion; I’m positive about that.

James is a controlling, possessive psycho. He won’t ever give me to anyone else.

Little by little, as inconspicuously as possible, I open my eyes. I notice, lying on my side, that I'm on a firm bed.

In front of me is a set of large, arched windows. Rain patters on the glass.

Silver moonbeams filter into the room, offering just enough light for me to see the leather armchair in the corner. The thick, dark rug that covers most of the floor. The fireplace.

A few feet ahead, there are double doors that lead to another room or the hallway. A bathroom, possibly. They're smaller than the other doors in the mansion, at least the ones on the main floor.

A lock of hair has fallen over my cheek sometime during the night. I notice that as well, and it doesn't look greasy like it did yesterday.

Another clue as to what happened to me while I've been out. For no other reason but sheer curiosity, I sniff my hair. A manly scent seeps in.

I press my lips shut to silence a gasp.

He washed me.

Oh my God.

A comforting thought slices through the rising panic. He hasn't fucked me. I clench my thighs, and nothing hurts. I'm sensitive, not sore.

Except it isn't as comforting as I would like.

Because a man's arm is draped over me. I feel it now that I'm fully awake.

I swallow around the lump in my throat.

James's arm. His tattooed hand presses possessively over my stomach.

Oh my God.

Fear, darker than this room, darker than the night outside, clutches onto my lungs. Locks my throat.

James took me out of the cell.

Hasn't raped me.

And now he's cuddling me in what has to be his bed.

Why?

The why is important. The why is crucial.

It's another game. Just another game.

Even if I've grown on him, the same way he's managed to crawl under my skin.

I did fuck with his head, his words, not mine.

He's going to punish me. Hurt me.

Kill me.

Have any idea why you're here? Know who was the last woman I held captive?

Topher's mom. His *dead* mom.

I'm going to be sick.

"Ophelia."

The scream that bursts out of me is deafening. My hands become claws, nails scratching and digging into his perfect, lean, and veiny forearm.

It's all instincts. All my will to fight and survive this.

He's strong, yanking me to the front of his body. My naked back molds into his naked stomach as I keep digging my nails into his arm.

Naked.

I'm completely naked. His hard body is too.

"Let me go." Common sense slips away as one thought after the other assault me. I want to be with him. I shouldn't. He kidnapped me. He could throw me back in the cell. Have to get out. Have…to…get…out. "Let me go. Let me go. Let me go!"

"Shh." James slides his hand up to my breastbone. Large, strong fingers press between my breasts. Unmoving. Warming. Comforting. What the hell is this? Another trick. Of course it is. "Shh. Stop screaming. Breathe. Just breathe. You're safe."

His voice is bare of emotions. Which, I guess, is smart of him.

I would've thought he was manipulating me if he sounded too soft. Too harsh, and I'd be sure he'd kill me.

But he is lying.

Safe?

I'm not safe.

How can he say that after he hung me on that hook? After he looked furious down there in the cell?

And how the hell did Topher's mom die?

This panic isn't helping. He's right about one thing. I have to breathe. Can't afford to pass out again.

I stuff the panic down. Suck in air. Exhale slowly.

This goes on for minutes. His hand rises and falls with each one of my breaths, with his chin resting protectively on the top of my head.

Better.

I'm better.

Thanks to him.

No, I won't be grateful to him. Fuck him. Fuck his help.

In a few hours, he'll take it away. While I'll be left heartbroken.

I swallow a whimper, swallow the tears. His chest is warm, and I give up. I relax into him. Only for tonight. Because he doesn't seem like he's in the mood to kill me.

"That's it." His hand slides down my stomach. "Good girl, Ophelia. Rest."

Tremors rake through me at his touch. At how he drags me closer, pinning me to the hard panes of his body. He keeps pulling me into him, but he's not trying to fuck me.

He could. I might even let him.

My body shivers harder at the terrifying notion.

"What are you doing?" I whisper when I can't stand the silence any longer.

"Holding on to my property. In my bed."

God, it's embarrassing. I'm wet for him. For being called his property. For being debased like this, by him. I can't stop arching my back, needing the feel of him against my ass.

"It isn't that simple, James." Though my body has succumbed to my needs, my head hasn't. I have to figure out what's going on. "Why am I here? In this room?"

His lips press onto my hair. As he inhales deeply, I shudder in his arms. "I'm not sure, Ophelia. I haven't been sure about many things for a while now."

"You showered me." When life stops making sense, best to stick to the facts. Until he's comfortable around me. Until I don't teeter on the verge of losing my mind.

At the rate this is going, I will.

Topher's mom. He killed her. They had Topher, and then…

Could this be what he was trying to tell me? That I'm facing an identical fate?

Later. I'll freak out later, alone. Can't afford to have a meltdown around him. Can't let him hear me screaming my head off.

He'll see my weakness. He'll throw me back in the cell.

"I bathed you." Tingles break across my skin when he lowers his fingertips. When he brushes them along my hip bone and stays there. He

seduces me, and like a fool, I fall for it. For this monster. My owner. “In my bathtub. You were asleep the entire time.”

The entire time.

“How long have I been out?” Dread lines the bottom of my stomach. James senses it, the bastard, pressing his hand harder against me. Rocking his hips into my ass, once, his cock hard. “You drugged me?”

“You’ve been out the entire day. And no.” His lips travel lower, to my shoulder. They, like the rest of him, are a threat. “You were exhausted. Wouldn’t wake up. Before you ask, though you probably feel it, the answer is no. I didn’t take your virgin pussy.”

“You did something else.” I’m hyperventilating. He dips his fingertips lower. Toward my center. Just an inch. “You did something to me.”

“No, I did not.” He brushes his nose along my shoulder. So soft, so out of character, that I gasp. “I understand that being drenched for me confuses you. That you hate it. But I didn’t do anything remotely inappropriate, though I could have. You’re the one who’s desperate for it. Your body is begging me to fuck you. To lick your cunt. That’s all you. The only thing I did was bathe you and tuck you in.”

I gulp. Freeze. Shame lodges in my throat, and I can’t speak.

He knows. I’m so wet from him teasing the area just above my pussy. It’s impossible to deny it.

“Bastard. You’re hard from humiliating me.”

“Owning you gets me hard.” His teeth break my skin. Blood trickles from where he’s biting me, but I don’t scream. My mouth clamps shut. My body bows to get closer to him. Fuck. “And humiliating you.”

Very little courage is left in my weary body. Little, not nothing. With my back to him and the rain as our background noise, I summon it.

It’s now or never. “Is that what you did with Topher’s mom? Manipulated her into liking you until she gave birth to your son? Then you killed her?”

His palm stills on my stomach. Scalding my skin. His teeth bite harder. Dig deeper.

He can tell when my pain becomes insufferable. When I fidget despite myself. When I fight back.

James parts his lips, releasing me. “Curious.”

I’m going to regret this. I just know it. “What is?”

“You’ve figured out what I did to her.” In one harsh, swift movement, he cups my pussy. Hums when I gasp. To my absolute mortification, he dips a finger and feels for himself just how wet I am. “Yet you’re still jealous.”

Damn him, how am I supposed to focus when he starts stroking me with not one, but two fingers. The heel of his palm is on my clit. I wish I were alone. Wish I could cry. Or release all those sounds of pleasure that climb up my throat.

“I’m not jealous.” Talking is better than moaning. Even if that means I’ll anger him. I might die from prying into his personal life when he told me I was not allowed to. Better than showing him how much I crave this. How depraved I am. “How did she die?”

“She served her purpose.” He’s lying; I hear it in his voice. He didn’t kill her. Didn’t treat her like Topher treated me. He’s reciting the words. Reading them from an invisible teleprompter. “Gave me a son. Continued the lineage. After that”—his long finger curls inside me—“I had no use for her. I killed her.”

“Liar,” I breathe out. There’s no voice left in me. No fight. Just pure terror. Endless lust. “You’re saying that to scare me.”

“You act surprised.” His cock swells against me. “Why would you think I’m lying?”

“You had her in your dad’s home—”

“Yes.”

“To put a baby inside her.”

“I thought I was being clear. I did. Then I killed her.” His voice is as level as it was before. He pretends not to care. That he hasn’t lost sleep over it. But he tenses behind me. He’s bullshitting me, and I don’t know why. “A bullet between the eyes. She didn’t suffer more than she had to.”

“More than she had to.” My hands clench into fists as angry tears roll down my cheeks. “More than she had to! The nerve of you. You bastard. You kidnapped her. You raped her.”

“I did no such thing.”

I’m done. Officially done with him and this sick game.

But James is a predator. He senses that I’m about to fight him.

He moves fast. Strikes. Flips me on my back, using his forearms to cage me in.

“She wanted me to fuck her. She wanted *me*. She came to the cell willingly. I was kind to her when no one was watching. I hated the thought

of hurting her. I never, ever…" He shakes his head ever so subtly. "Doesn't matter. She's gone."

"*She*. *Her*." I hate that I can't hold back the tears. I take that anger and make fists of both my hands, punching his chest. It helped when I fought the bully foster sister I had. It does nothing to James. "You can't even say her name."

"Because she has no place in this room. It's you and me here." This is the first time he's really raised his voice at me. The first fire I've seen in his cold eyes tonight. "Yes, I'm telling you this to instill fear in you. So you stop crawling under my goddamn skin. You're driving me out of my mind. I thought I was clear before. I thought the punishment was enough. Yet you just keep…*Fuck*. Keep going deeper. Why are you doing this to me?"

My heart bangs loudly in my chest. This isn't right, how every crazy, psychotic thing he says makes me lean closer to him. My soul shouldn't reach out to this monster.

I'm losing myself.

"I don't care about her," he groans. This isn't a lie. His eyes tell me so.

"Is that what I am to you?" More tears. My chest caves in on itself. I feel everything. His hard dick against my pussy. His heart beating against mine. My sore, welted ass. How drenched I am for him. "A womb to fill? A woman to dispose of? Someone you don't care about?"

"Damn it, Ophelia, can't you see?" He wraps a hand around my throat, tipping my chin up with his thumb. His eyes flicker before he leans in to suck my tears off one cheek. The other. His gaze is back on mine, icy and horrible. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to check on you that first night you spent here. Shouldn't have developed an obsession with you for…for too fucking long. You were never meant to be here. The feelings I have, they're all wrong. Terribly wrong, and they're taking over me."

A barrage of questions swarms inside me. Toppling one over the other. Twisted attraction mixes with a new kind of fear. A horrible one.

One that makes me stop punching him. "I'm a problem for you, then."

Every part of me needs James's warmth, even a sliver of it. Anything he has to offer.

Every part of me wants to get the hell out of here.

His short hair is a mess. Face pinched in anguish. He seems younger. More human. "You are."

“You’re going to deal with that problem.”

The sadistic bastard he is, he doesn’t answer. James leans in, his lips pressing to the corner of my mouth. A threat, one of many. I shudder once again, yet I cling to him. Begging him to save me. To keep me. To not do what I think he’s about to do.

All the while I’m begging myself to hate him.

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17

OPHELIA

"Tell me, Ophelia." His free hand lowers to my breast, rolling my peaked nipple between his fingers. It hurts. It feels good. "Are you happy that she's gone?"

"No," I lie. In my head, a picture of him and another woman appears. Both of them welcoming Topher and me for that first dinner. Infuriating. "No, I'm not. If she were alive, I wouldn't be here. You wouldn't have bought me or planned to kill me."

"Killing you." He tries the words on his tongue, it looks like. James closes his eyes briefly. When he opens them, his stare is wicked. "Will believing I'm going to kill you make you cry harder?"

"Don't trick me." My body turns against me, forcing out a fresh wave of tears. I cry even harder at the frustration. At the ache in my bones. "You're going to kill me. That's what you do to women."

"Yet that doesn't change the fact that you're jealous. Of a dead woman."

"What difference does it make?" I try to cower from him. Raise my hands to my eyes, desperate to stop this madness inside my head.

"It does." Too easily, with one hand, he peels mine off my face, pinning my wrists over my head. The other one is back on my throat. "The truth, Ophelia. Stop testing me."

"Fine. Fine. I am. I'm glad she's not here." This isn't right, these emotions he brings up in me. I have no claim on him. I shouldn't get attached. Shouldn't be happy about another woman's unnecessary death. "Argh! I hate you!"

“No, you don’t.” He examines me closely. Silently. “You want to live. With me.”

My jaw slacks. Talk about whiplash. “I—What kind of statement is that?”

He lowers his hand down my chest, squeezing my tit. Grinding his cock on me. He hurts me so I’ll fear him. Moan for him. “Answer me.”

“The first part, yes, you psycho.” I’m not sobbing anymore. But it’s as if my tears obey James. I still cry rivers for him. Traitors. “Of course I want to live.”

“Then you’ll do as I say.” The pressure on my breast is gone, except what happens now is worse. He pumps two fingers in and out of my mouth. “You’re going to suck me. You’re going to do it while you think about all the ways I’m going to kill you. You’ll cry on my cock. When I make you come, you’ll scream around it.”

An understanding passes from him to me. He…

He’s not going to kill me.

This is a game to him. He gets off on my fear. On my tears.

He should die for this. I should be the one plotting his death.

Impossible. That’s the last thing on my mind. The last, when it needs to be the only thing I think of.

I do want to live. I also want to be his.

“Good girl.” His eyes are back to ice cold. Colder than the night outside. “Good fucking girl with your good fucking tears.”

Pulling out his fingers, he then offers me a swift brush of his lips against mine. That’s it. He gives me an achingly short moment of tenderness before manhandling me so I’m lying on top of him.

I’m sitting on his cock. He has his fingers biting into my hips.

The pressure between my legs grows into an ache. James slides his hands up my body, winding his fingers in my hair, and dragging me into a scorching kiss.

Too soon, he yanks me off him, then manhandles me again until my pussy is over his mouth. Until my mouth hovers over his dick.

I’m panting the lower I go, my hands trembling, weak with need. With fear. With so much confusion. I have nothing to do but wait for his orders. Wait until he puts my sick world back together.

“Wrap your lips around my dick.” He groans when my tears land on it. “Suck me just like you did in the cell. Don’t stop. Even when I make you

come so hard that you gag and choke on me. I'm the one who decides when I'm done."

He's conditioned me to be turned on by his demeaning orders. Either that or I've been craving this my entire life.

I've been craving him, period.

Maybe if he does end up killing me, it won't be that bad. I'd have died at the hands of the only man who ever saw me. The only man who reached into my soul. The only man I never wanted to leave.

"Do it." His hand cracks on my ass, on the welts he's left there.

I grab the base of his cock. He's so hard. Veins cord his length. A drop of precum wets the tip.

"Too slow, Ophelia. I see you need proof I'm the vicious monster you think I am. The man who'll end your life and throwing away the body." His hot breath and threats have my thighs clenching. "I'll give you one."

Eviscerating that last inch between us, James forces my pussy to his mouth. The pleasure is insanely strong. Painfully so. I reach forward, clawing at the sheets. Trying to escape him.

He's brutalizing me. A pleasure assault that makes me scream and beg him to stop.

He doesn't let up.

He does worse than that. He tilts my hips up. Pushes his mouth between my pussy lips.

Bites my clit.

"Stop," I scream. I cry. I scratch his thighs, drawing blood. "It's too much."

No words come out of his mouth. Nothing but growls as he sucks, bites, and licks me in the ruthless way of his. At some point, I'm not sure if it's pain or pleasure I'm experiencing.

All I know is that I feel. That I'm scared.

That I need more.

I give up on getting away, starting to ride his face. Oh God. Oh my fucking God, that, that, *that*, right there. I'm getting used to the pain, and it's so good. Using him. Grinding my hips on him as much as his grip allows. It's not much, but he knows what I need better than I do, somehow.

When my climax comes, my vision darkens. My lungs burn. I'm shaking all over.

I don't know what this is. All I know is, "James."

Six harsh smacks to my ass are a command. An order.

A reminder of what else I'm desperate for.

While I ride my orgasm, he builds another one within me, and I shove his cock into my mouth. He thrusts his hips up until the head hits my throat. I moan at the fullness in my mouth. At the sound he's making against my pussy. At pleasuring this monster.

In the back of my head, I remember our conversation. What a horrible man he is. What awful things he did.

How he might lie.

How I'm not upset about it. Not really.

I need this.

Wrapping my hand around the base of his cock, with his mouth on my pussy, I start sucking him. I spit on him. I lick him. I gag on him.

Everything we've done in the cell, except now we're in this new position. Now we're in his bedroom.

"God, fuck. Ophelia. That thing you do with your tongue." He pumps my pussy with his fingers while he talks. "Just like that. Don't you dare fucking stop."

He coats two fingers with my arousal. I realize too late that he's lubing them, not pleasuring me. He uses my own juices to help him shove one finger, then two, into my ass, up to the first knuckle.

At the invasion, a scream rips from my mouth. I gag harder. Can hardly breathe. I've never had anything in my ass and now I have two thick fingers in there.

I have a cock in my mouth. The cock of a murderer. Of a man who kidnaps and then sells women.

A man my soul aches for.

"Suck harder." He jerks his hips up, his thighs flexing under my fingers. "Take me down that pretty throat. Choke on me. Just like that. Yes. Yes. You're such a filthy little thing. You're going to come for me again. This way…" He bites the inside of my thigh. Groans when I cry out, when I take him like he ordered me to. "I might change my mind about killing you."

Whether he means it or not is no longer relevant. What matters is his pleasure. His approval. He swells in my mouth, and I taste his precum. I gulp on it, desperate for more.

"Oh, *fuck*," he groans and pulls my pussy to his mouth.

This has to be the sloppiest blow job ever. No rhythm to it. No rhyme.

Just my tongue flattening on his length, my lips squeezing his cock.

I hollow my cheeks because it seems like the logical thing to do. How more of him will go down my throat without me gagging. I do it while he finger-fucks my ass. While his tongue rubs at my pussy. His mouth sucking on my clit.

I'm done crying, but he doesn't care. He groans and grunts against my wetness. He gives me everything I need for another orgasm to send ripples through my body.

"You're mine to ruin," James says when he's drawn the last wave of my orgasm from me. "Make no mistake, Ophelia. I will ruin you."

I don't know what that means. He doesn't offer any explanation.

James manhandles me again so brutally to sit on top of him without a shred of tenderness.

But he doesn't shove me down his cock. I'm just there. For him to hold.

He's a god, lying on his back, his taut abs on display. His furious glare aimed at me. An evil god.

Maybe I'm not worth that much to him.

"What?" I'm confused, clutching his chest. The despair in my voice is humiliating. "What do you want? Why aren't you fucking me?"

"Don't worry about that." He grips my hips, rocks my wet pussy over his cock, once, twice, then, "Go lower. Let me look into those pretty eyes when your lips wrap around my cock."

I do. I go down his body.

"I'll destroy your virgin cunt." In one shove, he pushes my face down his cock, winding his fist in my hair as he fucks my throat. I cough, I gag. Spit. He's getting impossibly harder in my mouth. "When I decide it's time. When you beg for it. Now, be a good girl and look at me. That's it. Desperate and mine. All mine."

It's sick to be turned on by this. He degrades me and humiliates me, uses me up. I suck him, craving it. For long minutes, I give him as much pleasure as he's taken from me. I give him everything.

Until—"Fuck. *Fuck*. Yes. Close your eyes." His jaw tics. "Close your fucking eyes."

James pulls me off him by my hair. I hear his hand stroking his soaked cock before he comes, emptying himself on my mouth, my nose, my eyes.

I'm drenched in him.

I'm eerily calm.

“Beautiful.” He leaves me there, held up. He must be looking at me. I hope so, even though it’s wrong to wish for it. “Wearing my cum. So fucking hot. It’s infuriating, how gorgeous you are.”

He doesn’t mean that I’m infuriating. I know.

He means that he’s lost control. He means that he’s not himself.

I would’ve told him that he had it all wrong. He’s being exactly who I’ve come to expect of James.

A gentle man wouldn’t have shoved his clean fingers into my mouth so I’d take more of his cum. Even as he carries me to the bathroom, when he gets to washing my face, he isn’t being tender.

Methodical, yes. Careful not to hurt me and get everything off me, sure.

Not gentle.

Maybe I don’t need gentle.

Maybe I never did.

Maybe, possibly, what I’ve dreamed of my entire life is to curl up in bed against the big, bad wolf and take my chances with him.

For tonight, I do just that.

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18

JAMES

Light flashes from my phone on the bedside table. The one on Ophelia's side.

Her side.

Her bedside table.

Hers.

Ridiculous.

Hers isn't a concept that exists in this house. In my world. Even if it feels so good to have her in my bed. Like this, huddled in my arms, her body wrapped around mine as I lie on my back.

The phone isn't on *her* bedside table.

It's there. Just there, exactly where I put it before I drew her a bath this morning. I didn't mean to put it on one table or the other. I took it out of my jeans pocket. Placed it there. That's it.

When I carried her to the bath, and settled her on top of me, and washed her, I forgot about it altogether. When I ran my hands through her hair and stroked her soft skin with a washcloth and soap, I didn't remember that there was a world outside of this one.

What I did do was try to make sense of why I took such good care of her.

For a moment there, I had it. If she got sick because I neglected her hygiene, I couldn't use her.

I kept telling myself that as I massaged her neck. Worked on the knots in her shoulders. Rubbed her breasts, her stomach.

I just needed her to be in top shape so I could breed her.

That was why I was taking such good care of her.

That's a lie.

Because I'm over here, watching her sleep and *not* doing the one thing that'd actually get her pregnant.

I'm not fucking her.

Ophelia murmurs my name in her sleep. Her breath hitches. Nails digging into my chest. Her forehead is warm against my skin.

She breathes faster still.

She's having a nightmare about me.

Good.

She should always remember that.

I'm her monster.

The screen of my phone flashes repeatedly. It can't be Griffith since his job is done. The rest of the people who work for me wouldn't dare call me this week. I gave them strict orders not to do so.

"James." Ophelia clings closer to me. "Stop. Stay. Oh God. Please."

The memory of making her cry on my cock is burned into my head. I'm instantly hard, my hands flexing on the back of Ophelia's head, her waist. I won't wake her.

Sleep is essential for a person's overall health.

And besides, she's beautiful like this. Unconscious and scared.

The light from the phone stops.

Lights up again.

Motherfucker.

Gently—fuck, what's wrong with me?—I slide Ophelia off me. Her dark hair is spread out on the charcoal gray pillowcase, her body curled into a ball beneath the sheets.

I climb out of bed, pull on the gray sweatpants I left on my armchair, and swipe the phone from the bedside table.

Topher.

I haven't called him back yet.

I've been busy watching Ophelia while she slept in my bed.

Then I fixed her meals for the rest of the week. Decent ones, like the ones I cooked her over the last two days.

Not that garbage peanut butter sandwich that I'd fed her on that first night. I'd meant to torture her, and she'd gotten off on it.

She thanked me for saving the other women too. I got hard from how gratitude sounded on her lips. From her I hate yous.

While I've been neglecting my son. The one to carry on my life's work when I'm no longer around. That is, if I keep him around.

Until then, he's my responsibility. I have to look out for him so he won't go to Oliver or suspect anything. Just until I get my shit together and figure out what the hell I'm doing with Ophelia.

I won't use her and cast her aside, that's for sure.

Anyway. Topher.

He doesn't stop calling. Suspicion and concern rise inside of me. They quicken my steps. I close the door behind me and walk down the hall.

I'm not concerned about Ophelia leaving me or getting out of bed. Or this house. Physically, that's impossible.

She can steal my clothes. Or she can find the ones I stocked and organized for her in the adjacent room while she'd been in the cell downstairs. Everything was ordered through my personal shopper the morning after I bought Ophelia.

I had no intention of keeping her. No idea what I was going to do with her. How to fix this part of the convoluted plot that was my life.

Regardless, I had it stocked. I hung and placed every piece of clothing on the hangers and drawers myself.

So yeah. She can grab something from there.

But she'll never make it out of the premises. The farthest she can get is past the round driveway and toward the gates. If she ever gets that far.

Over the years, no one has been in or out of this estate without my permission. And not for lack of trying.

I descend the curved staircase to the main floor, taking the call in the privacy of my den. It shouldn't take long. He's a grown ass man, capable of taking care of his own problems.

And I need to be with her.

"Topher."

"Dad." It's early morning in Spain. There's music surrounding him. Muted, though. He's stepped away from the party. "We have to talk."

He sounds worn out. Different. His confidence is missing. I didn't raise him to be like this. It grates on my nerves that after the initiation, while he's celebrating, I hear weakness in his voice.

He’s keeping me from Ophelia because he can’t hold it together without me for a week?

“What’s wrong?” Darkness stares back at me from the window. “I told you I’d call.”

“Ophelia.”

Her name on his lips. He pushes it out as if he didn’t mean to say it. I sure as fuck didn’t want to hear it. Didn’t see it coming.

“What about her?” Possessiveness slithers into my voice. I clear my throat. “The auction went well if it’s my approval you’re after. The buyer hasn’t returned her.”

The other one, Miss Johnson, hasn’t complained about Baylor’s mysterious kidnapping. Despite the millions she’d shelled on the girl. She might be ashamed that she’d gotten away. Might be scared to bitch and whine and ask for a refund.

Who cares.

“The buyer,” he hisses, sounding less pathetic than before. My hackles rise. I listen carefully. “Ophelia doesn’t belong to him.”

The urge to shout *the fuck she doesn’t* is intense. Demanding.

She’s mine. Mine. Mine.

I shove it down. Soon, the secret will be out. When I decide it’s time. When the new plan that’s forming in my head is foolproof.

“He bought her, Topher.” I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the roots. “That means she’s his. Is that why we needed to talk? So I can explain to you how auctions work? Did Oliver leave something out?”

“Always so cold, aren’t you, Dad?” A glass breaks on his side.

“Tantrums are beneath you.” If I sound disdainful, it’s because I feel it. Even Ophelia’s sobbing wasn’t so…pathetic. Truthfully, she wasn’t pathetic at all. “Beneath every Hawthorne man.”

“Fuck you and fuck the Hawthorne name.”

“Watch your mouth.”

Another glass smashes into pieces. No one yells at him for breaking shit.

“I’m getting her back. You have to help me get her back.”

“Getting her back?” His confession is a shock to the system. “You never mentioned wanting her. You can’t have her back. You can’t”—my teeth gnash, and I force my jaw to loosen—“get her pregnant. It’s a done deal.”

“N—Not like that, either.”

I’m losing my patience. My respect for him is dwindling by the second.

My possessiveness, that side of me, grows tenfold. Doubles and quadruples in size.

She isn’t his. She’s mine. Until I decide I’m done. Even then, she won’t be his.

“I want to own her. Me.”

My hand that’s not holding the phone clenches into a tight fist. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“This entire time, I’ve been pretending,” he shouts at me. “The stupid lineage! That’s why I’ve been pretending.”

Shouting.

At me.

“Lower your fucking voice.” I’m more than pissed. Anger, hot and consuming, pounds inside my chest. “You can’t own her. You can’t keep acting like a spoiled brat. For God’s sake, pull yourself together.”

“There’s more to life than your goddamn legacy.” He has lowered his voice, but he’s no less indignant. “I lied when I said that she meant nothing to me. I can’t stop thinking about what I did to her on that stage. I want more of it. Fighting her. Humiliating her. I want to ruin her and make her mine. I got off on her pain.”

“She’s not yours,” I say before I can catch myself. “She was never yours to begin with.”

“We can change that. You and me, Dad, we can have women to torture instead of giving the best ones away. We don’t need the money. And yes, Oliver is obsessed with the auction house and the tradition. Fuck him. We’re stronger than him and Camden. Smarter. You know this.”

I do. I also know that no one will have Ophelia. No one will own her but me.

Only me.

“We don’t torture women.” As a rule. I wish he’d get it through his thick, sadistic skull already. Ophelia and me, that’s a different story. Not what he has planned for her. “You’re young. It’ll pass.”

“Were you ever in love with Paisley? Or Faye?”

My sacrifice. His mother.

The women I never loved. The ones I saved anyway.

“That’s beside the point.” My nostrils flare. My heart pumps blood to my veins, preparing for war. “You don’t love her. You said so yourself.”

“How is it beside—”

“You’re going to enjoy your time off, Topher. Then you’ll come back here. You’ll forget about Ophelia.” The woman who was about to end things between the two of you. The woman who’s mine. “You’ll have a son.” From a consenting woman, or you’ll go down too. “Life will go on.”

“No, it won’t.”

“This conversation is over.” I’m done listening to him, a man challenging my claim on *my* Ophelia. “Go take a cold shower. Drink some water. Sleep it off. Do not call me until you grow the hell up.”

He huffs. Groans. Something crashes. This time, it sounds like wood splintering.

The longer I’m on the phone, the more territorial I become. The worse the pressure in my head is turning into.

“Be a good son, Topher,” I say, my rage barely contained. “Be *my* son. When you remember how to be that person, you can call me back.”

“You’re right.” He sighs. “You’re right. Talk later.”

“Goodnight.” I end the call.

I stay in the den a while longer. But I’m not here to look at the oil paintings hanging on the walls. I don’t pick one of the books on my bookshelves. The folders I have, which hold incriminating photos, contracts, and emails on my heavy wooden desk, I ignore just the same.

What I do—despite my better judgment—is place an order. A gift for both Ophelia and me.

The confirmation that it’ll be here first thing in the morning comes through, and I return to my bedroom.

Where Ophelia is sound asleep, exactly how I left her. I get under the covers, fold her into my arms, press her back to my front.

Despite fearing me, she knows this one thing.

This is where she belongs.

For now. At least for now.

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19

JAMES

I'm lying here in my bed. Staring out the windows at the trees in my backyard.

Ophelia's sleeping in my arms. Sometime over the night, I moved to lie on my back and brought her close to me. She's so soft, so sweet. Her leg is draped over mine; her hand is resting on my heart. Claiming me.

For the first time in my life, I'm genuinely perplexed.

No idea where to go from here. What to do with her.

Wait, I do. I know.

She's mine. I'm keeping her.

She'll be pregnant by next month. She'll stay right here, even after our child is born.

I'm done lying to myself about it.

Moreover, after Topher called and forced me to face the truth.

I have feelings for her. Deeply rooted ones.

She's not going anywhere.

My hand runs through her soft hair. I look down at her. The sunlight golden on her skin. Dark eyelashes on rosy cheeks.

The woman who drives me insane. Who complicates everything.

It should've been simple. Eliminating the Morgan men. Sending the virgins and the would-be mothers off to unknown destinations. Tearing everything down.

Starting anew, just me and Topher. Or just me.

Now I need to consider how I'll handle this new situation. When I was obsessed with Ophelia from afar, I thought I could let her go. Those days are gone.

She's mine. She'll be safe here.

Topher won't.

I stroke her hair some more, watching her soft lips, and listening to her softer breaths.

I stretch this moment for as long as possible.

This space in time where I'm not a lawyer. Not a father. Not a glorified extortionist. Not a man forced to follow in his family's footsteps.

I let myself be James Hawthorne around her.

Whoever that person is.

My heartbeats are unusually erratic. It's bothersome.

Four days.

Things will fall into place after that. Once I'm back in the office, I'll get my shit together and figure this out.

Or this illusion will end, and I'll send her off.

Until then, it's fine. After forty-three years of being exactly what everyone's been expecting of me, what I've been expecting of myself, I can be this.

Sick. Obsessive. Seduced.

Making all the wrong decisions.

Ordering items that don't belong in this house. Items that'll be gone when she's no longer here.

A break. I deserve this goddamn break.

"James?" Her voice is hesitant. Her muscles flex. Pulse rising. She's woken up, noticing the change in me.

I feel it too. The adrenaline flooding my veins, it's there.

I'm not a good man. She'll do well to remember it.

"Sonnet." Wrong. So fucking wrong of me to dive my hand deeper into her hair. To yank on it so her face tilts up. This need to look her in the eye. "Hello."

"How long have I been out this time?" She searches my eyes, hoping I might be less of a bastard after last night, I guess.

"Just the night. Which you needed. You look well-rested."

Lies.

Ophelia is far more than that.

Her large dark eyes stare at me. Her lips are full, pink, and swollen.

The fear reverberating from her is intoxicating. The wonder. The need.

Well-rested. What a fucking understatement.

“Thank you.” When she sees I won’t hurt her, she relaxes against me. “How’d you sleep?”

I stare at her without saying a word. I’m out of my depth here. I don’t do intimacy. I can’t give it to her.

“James.” Ophelia laughs, the sound joyous even though I’m tugging harder on her hair now. My cock hardens at that. “It was a simple question. Unless you didn’t sleep tonight.”

“I slept well.” Her deep gaze is fucking with my head. With my soul. “If you think small talk will make me spare your life, think again.”

She flinches. Her lips pinch.

A moment later, she presses her hot body closer to mine and rearranges her features. Her lips curve into a smile.

“No one can tell you what to do. Fully aware.” A chuckle escapes her, then her hand slaps on her mouth. “Can I brush my teeth before we continue this conversation, owner?”

I don’t tell her that I couldn’t care less that I brushed mine and she hasn’t. That her morning breath is as sweet as the rest of her.

That I’m a sick bastard who has a sick addiction.

Her.

I don’t say a damn thing.

I pull her closer to me. Remove her hand from her mouth.

Goddamn it. That brush of her lips against mine. Her huge pupils. How her first instinct is to move her head back in an attempt to resist me.

I kiss her harder for that. Coax her lips open, groan when I rub my tongue against hers.

When she melts into me, I can’t help but feel a growl reverberating in my chest. I bite her lips. I dig my fingers into the soft flesh of her waist. I hurt her.

Ophelia should punch me. Bite back. Kick me until I let go.

A monster like me has no business kissing a sweet, beautiful woman like her. Or keeping her.

Instead of slapping me, her hand finds my neck. She follows my lead, leaning into the kiss. Moans for me with each swipe of my thumb along her cheek.

Huffs when I pull her off me.

“There are new toothbrushes in the bathroom.” Her eyes go wider than before. “You’ve proven you can be out of the cell without trying to escape. So. Go, brush your teeth. We can do this thing after that. This talking.”

Her mouth forms an O shape.

“Don’t give me that look.” Nothing makes me as uncomfortable as her craving for intimacy.

“You’re not a good man, I get it.” She nods, a smile curving on her lips. “Could you be nice enough to get me coffee, though? Please?”

This woman. The best course of action would be to sling her over my shoulder. Throw her back in the cell where she can’t pull at my nonexistent heartstrings.

“Peanut butter sandwich too?”

“You’re pushing it,” I warn her, and she laughs.

Then, while she’s in the bathroom, I put on my sweatpants and go to make her coffee. That and her damn sandwich. She can have a real meal this afternoon.

What am I going to do with her until then?

Talk to her. Fuck her. Lock her up.

The water from the shower turns off as soon as I step back inside the room.

This isn’t who I am, this man who places the plate and mug on the bedside table, then enters the bathroom.

Can’t be me, this man who wants to do everything for her.

No.

“Let me.” I stand behind her, whipping a clean towel off a shelf on the wall.

Ophelia stares at me through my reflection in the vanity. She’s so tiny compared to my height and size. So defenseless.

This is her best opportunity to escape this hellhole. She could break the glass of the mirror. Grab a shard and go for my jugular.

I know I would.

Not her.

A small smile plays on her lips as I tie a towel around her body.

She stands very still as I attend to each knot in her hair. The brush is new, has only been used once. On her.

Just like the blow dryer I use to dry her hair.

It’s embarrassing that I watched a YouTube video to figure this hair-blowing thing out so I could tend to Ophelia.

It is what it is.

“What would you do if you weren’t…” she trails off. I’m done drying her hair, dipping my chin, indicating for her to go on. She gestures with her hand in the air around the room. “This.”

“A man who brushes your hair?”

“Ha!” She barks a laugh. Me, joking. Who would’ve fucking believed it. “Well. That and an attorney. Owning the auction house. Owning me.”

The question is a personal one. A disturbing one.

“What would *you* do?” I ask her, refusing to open up. To give her more power over me.

Her eyes go blank. She blinks, huffing, and turns her head to the corner of the room. “Forget it. You’re right. It was better when we were strangers.”

Pressure builds inside my head. This isn’t right. Isn’t what I’m after.

I’m after her secrets. After what lies hidden deep inside her.

And I have a way to pull it out of her. I leave her there, stalking out of the room to my walk-in closet.

“James?” she calls out.

“Stay where you are.”

Ophelia does as I say until I return. I have a pair of lace panties and one of my T-shirts in my hands, and this isn’t right.

Undoing the knot in the towel wrapping her body. Helping her into the clothes is worse. It’ll give her false hopes. Make her think I’m normal.

A calm, comfortable life isn’t in the cards for me.

I wasn’t born for that. I’ve been programmed to do one thing. Be this one person.

Somehow, my hand finds the small of her back, and I guide her back to bed.

“Talk.” I’m under the covers, next to her, watching her sip on her coffee. My muscles tense at the strangeness of this. I’m used to meetings in the office. Meals in the dining room. She’s destroying me, and I’m unable to stop it. “What would you be doing if you weren’t here.”

“This doesn’t sound like you’re asking anything.”

“That’s because I don’t. I demand answers. That’s what I do.”

She smirks behind her mug, her cheeks flushing. When she lowers it, I see a thin layer of foam has remained over her lip. I press my thumb to it,

wiping her clean.

Shoving it in her mouth.

“Suck.” After she does, I take my thumb out, watching her. Holding back from fucking her. “Talk.”

She licks her lips. “What about asking instead of ordering me?”

“No. I hold the power. Over Topher. Oliver and his son, though they’re unaware of it. The associates in the law firm. Our clients. Even the witnesses on the stand. They owe me answers, and they give them to me.” It should disturb me, these words that slip out of my mouth. “So do you. Now, talk.”

“You’re going to get me pregnant. Then take my child. Then kill me.” She mimics my voice. Cold and authoritative. In the little time I’ve shown her a side of me that isn’t a complete asshole, she’s grown accustomed to me. She might not even believe I could actually hurt her. Hell, I don’t believe that either anymore. “You’re not getting anything else from me. I won’t tell you a single thing about myself.”

“The fuck you will. I’m your owner.” Anger flushes through me. This is all wrong. We’re all wrong. I’m still hungry for the information Topher couldn’t or wouldn’t provide. “You dropped out of college. Why?”

Any semblance of humor has been wiped off her face. Her grip on the handle of her mug tightens. Her arm trembles. The hot liquid sloshes in the mug. “Fuck. You.”

“Put the mug away.”

“Fuck. You,” she repeats, her chin wobbling.

“Put the fucking mug away.”

Ophelia’s nostrils flare. As indignant and upset as she is, she places the mug behind her.

As soon as she does, I grip her jaw, forcing her to look at me. “Why?”

“You people.” Her lips twist, eyes narrowing. “You have it all figured out. You look down at people who still struggle. Who are still searching.”

“You’re putting words in my mouth.”

“And you put a dick in mine.”

“So this is how it’s going to go?” I’m miles away from what you’d call an empath. But I would’ve been a lousy defense lawyer if I couldn’t figure out people’s motives. How to read a jury. “I hit a nerve. You’re hurt, and you stay silent.”

“While you stay condescending, sadistic, and cruel.”

“I’m not being condescending.” I flip her on her stomach and lock her wrists behind her back with one hand. “I’m curious.” I shrug my pillow out of the pillowcase, using the latter to bind her wrists. “But you’re being obstinate.”

“Let go of me.” The fighter she is, she wrestles beneath me. Her hair falls over her beautiful face. “Sharing goes both ways, James. When I’m out of these binds, you owe me some truths, too, or I’m binding you.”

“Is that a threat?”

The knot around her wrists won’t cut off her blood flow. She won’t be able to free herself from it, either. I bend so my face is close to hers, tucking her hair behind her ear.

She snarls at me. “It’s a promise.”

“It doesn’t work that way. You belong to me. I’m the one who calls the shots here. Understood?”

“I’m lost. Okay? O-fucking-kay? Is that what you wanted to hear?” Her shouting at me is jarring. The volume of it doesn’t bother me. It’s how visceral it is. How hurt. How have I missed it? “I’m lost. Ever since my parents died, I’ve been struggling to survive. Not everyone in foster care was nice. A few screamed and slapped and mocked me. My parents were broke when they died, so I had to fight to get good grades, be in the goddamn drama club for the goddamn scholarship for college. I had to be better than everyone. But I wasn’t living. I was surviving.”

The speed at which she spits it at me. The pain in her voice. Like she’s been dying for someone to listen to her. Really listen.

There wasn’t anyone who would.

I listen. To her aching heart. Her battles.

And I’m fascinated. I soak up every little detail. I’m furious at my son for keeping this from me. Or more like it—for never asking her just how badly she had to fight to become the person she is today.

“Then, when I finally made it to college...” She growls, and it’s hot. Her anger is hot. Her humiliation is as well. My heart keeps twisting for her, needing to go back in time and make everything right for her. “I started questioning myself. I couldn’t find any major I was drawn to. I was disappointed in myself. My parents are probably rolling in their graves. I hated that thought more than anything. So I dropped out. Is that a good enough answer for you? That I’m a quitter? That I have no idea where to go

from here? That I left everything behind just so I wouldn't have to ask myself what would make me happy for another goddamn second?"

I've never been this impressed with anyone in my life. Never this attracted to such a feral, perfectly broken person.

"You're resilient. Bright. Young. Not a disappointment. You will find out what it is you want out of life." Her eyes shimmer when she realizes I'm genuinely curious. I'm making a vow to her. I promise her life instead of death. "Until then, you'll learn what it means to belong to me."

Nothing. She gives me the silent treatment.

Silence works for me if she lets me feed her, which she does.

Then she stays put while I head over to my closet, grab a tie, and, in complete silence, bind her ankles.

She stays there, her wrists and ankles bound, for the rest of the day. It hurts, this distance. This floor separating us.

It's necessary. For me as well as for her.

She needs to remember who I am. I need a clear head to figure out how to fix it.

I only return to my room when she needs to use the bathroom. For lunch and dinner.

We don't talk throughout the entire day.

But when she falls asleep, when I watch her in my bed late at night with the soft light from the lamp at my bedside table kissing her face, that's when I can't take the silent treatment for a second longer.

I'm coming for her.

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20

OPHELIA

I wake up moaning.

Out of nowhere. I didn't even feel the sound ripping out of my throat.

I feel it now. I feel everything.

My pussy is hot. Pressure keeps building there, pulling me out of my dreamless sleep.

There's a man between my legs, I realize, as my eyes flutter open.

Bedridden brown hair. Icy glare. Bare shoulders and chest.

Strong fingers pressing my legs apart.

His tongue is on my clit. Teasing me.

Just the tip of it flicking on the most sensitive part of me.

This is torture, how James taunts and torments me. How he stares at me like I'm his to devour. A dull ache grows in my core from this barely-there touch.

He was an asshole to me the entire day. Resurrected the wall between us. He was also hot. I'll always be seduced by his bossiness. I've been desperate for someone to care so deeply that they take over my life.

My heart stopped hurting sometime before I fell asleep. I was going to tell him I was done with the silent treatment in the morning.

He's beaten me to it.

He's punishing me for it.

I squirm, trying to escape the featherlight pleasure. From him. He's doing it to hurt me. He's pinning me to the bed. Glaring at me and telling

me through his body that I’m never going to get off. That he’ll edge me for eternity.

“Why?” When pushing him away fails, I lift my hips. Attempting to, at least, reach him.

He shoves me down. Grips me harder. His fingers bite into my flesh. He knows it turns me on, his viciousness.

He’s driving me mad by not giving me what I want. What I need.

“James, please.” My muscles burn with the effort to get closer to him. But no matter how hard I try to raise my ass off the bed, all the pressure I put on his hair when I pull on it with my free hand, he won’t let me have him. “Why are you doing this? Why are you punishing me? For the silent treatment? It’s not fair. I told you everything.”

Chipping away at my sanity, he licks me, teasing me. His dark eyes grow darker by the second.

He doesn’t just own me. He owns this bed—this scene.

The world.

I release his hair and clutch onto the sheets instead. I’m soaking. Panting. Clenching. He can see everything. He can smell my need for him.

He won’t get to hear my desperation.

He won’t.

“Ophelia.”

Fire spreads through me, frying my brain. It’s the way he’s saying my name against my clit. So cold. So commanding.

That’s a whole other level of torture. Worse than before. To have him this close, when every nerve ending throughout my body is sensitive. I’ve never been this vulnerable in my life. This needy.

And it feels safe. Being vulnerable around him.

“You owe me something.” Another flick of his tongue. More pressure from his fingers.

My toes curl, and my eyes roll to the back of my head. He swirls his tongue next, another suggestion of a touch.

At this rate, I think I’m going to black out.

“Anything.” I’m failing myself. Staring at him like he holds the answers to life. Like he’s actually my master. “Please, whatever you need, I’ll do it.”

He pulls back an inch. Enough to make me squirm. Enough to allow me a glimpse of all of him.

The lamp's light casts a warm glow on his handsome face, on his day-old stubble.

The corner of his lips tugs up.

He's gorgeous.

THAT'S NOT ACCURATE. I don't think he's gorgeous.

I think he's more. He's a gift, created especially for me.

Ever since I lost my parents, I've been chasing this feeling. This person who'd care for me as much as I care for him. To have someone consumed by me. Envelop me into his darkness where I'd never want to leave.

Fuck, it's as if I've been manifesting him my entire life.

"You've been…" He traces his hand to the space between my thighs, dragging his thumb along my slit. I scream. I shudder. It's not *anyone* I've needed; I see that now. I've needed him. "Good, mostly. A good little property."

"What do you want? Stop teasing me. Tell me what to do, and I'll do it." I gasp, burying my heels into the mattress, lifting my ass. James pushes me back down where he wants me. Where I belong. "Other than torturing me, you bastard, what do you want?"

"You're a clever girl." Storm clouds gather over his face. His smirk is gone. The grip on my thighs is unbearable. "You know what I'm asking for."

"No." Yes. Maybe. If I had air in my lungs, if my throat weren't so tight, choked by desire, maybe I would've remembered. "I-I don't. Please." When he spits on my clit, my entire body breaks into tremors. After being teased for an eternity, it's too much. "Oh God. Oh, Jesus."

"Beg for me." With his tattooed hand, he nudges his thumb into my pussy. Only up to the first knuckle. Another form of torture. "Beg me to make you come. To fuck you."

Nothing and no one could've prepared me for this. For this deep desire he's sparked within me. He threatened me. Told me what would happen after he fucked me. After I became pregnant with his baby.

I should be terrified. I should shut the hell up and never speak again. He might throw me back into the cell or force himself on me.

Or.

Or he could change his mind. Rewrite his history. Make me his forever.

I need him to do it. I'll beg him for it. Not because I need to survive this.

Because I can't imagine a life without him in it.

"Please." The covers crumple between my fingers. My voice is strained. "Please, James."

"Not good enough." His spit trickles down my pussy and he licks it off me. One swipe of his tongue that sends electricity through me. "You can do better than that. You will do better than that."

"Please, I—" I hate him. I'm falling for him. If he doesn't do something soon, I'll cry for him. "Touch me. Make me come. Let me stay with you."

"Not good enough." He purses his lips, blowing hot air on me. I'm dying. I'm seriously dying. Being edged and teased until my heart stops working. "Do. Better."

All the need in my body transforms into a ball of rage.

Since he's stronger, I can't shove him off me. Can't force his cock inside me. His lips on me.

But I can hit him where it hurts. My lungs burn. The need for him is making me lightheaded. Still, I snarl. "Topher would've never done this to me."

That earns me a growl as he shoves his thumb deeper, forcefully, no teasing this time.

I've gotten to him. He's finally losing control.

"Topher wouldn't have the first idea. He'd never know what to do with you."

His lips are on me. His teeth. James bites and sucks on my clit. Both his hands are on my hips. He's using my body to fuck his mouth.

Pleasure crashes into me, and I can't get two breaths in before I come on his tongue.

"Oh God." This is the most intense, most powerful orgasm of my life.

The teasing, the anticipation. This desire that's been building up within me. They explode inside me, reaching to the back of my neck, behind my eyes.

"Oh God," I repeat. I'm saying other things, like James's name and *stop* and *more* and *please*.

"Topher." James pulls back, running his tongue along his wet lips. Tasting my orgasm. "You want the truth about Topher, Ophelia?"

He rises to sit on his knees, his hands still firm on my thighs. His cock pushes against his black boxers, hard and terrifying.

James doesn't do anything about it. Nothing other than glower at me.

He's composed. Feral. Possessed.

Jealous.

My owner.

"What?" I whisper, trying to come down from this high. From being so lost to him. "Stop hiding things from me. Just stop."

"After the first time I saw you, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I hoped he'd set you free. Wished he would've chosen another woman." He climbs up my body, wrapping a hand around my throat. His thumb strokes my jawline. "One look at you, and I knew. Knew I wanted you. Knew you deserved better. Better than going through the auction, even if I had plans to save you by the end of it. You made me reconsider my plans. I waited for Topher to do it, and he didn't. Then I gave him another chance. I held onto hope that the look in his eyes would stop reminding me of my father. That he'd come to his senses. He never did."

I just lie there, shocked. Horrified. Mesmerized.

"I'll let you in on a little secret." He lowers his voice. "I might've been brought up on violence, but I've only murdered one man. A man who should've never been alive in the first place. Topher, on the other hand, would torture you for fun. He begged me to do it. He's as bad as the rest of them."

Them? Who is them? Oliver and his son?

Although, really, their identity doesn't matter.

What matters is, "Wait, so, you were acting back there? How you threw me into the cell? You're not going to kill me?"

"No."

He isn't a rapist, then, either. He didn't kill Topher's mom.

But he put a girl up for auction. Then again, if his father was anything like him—strong, powerful, commanding—I can't see how he had a choice in the matter.

He never wanted anything with any of this.

Yet here I am. Alive and his.

It's obvious that I wasn't supposed to happen. My being here was not planned.

He might regret his decision. Might not let me stay. He might dispose of me somehow.

No. No. I'm his. He can't do that to me. I belong here by his side.

I open my mouth to speak. To scream at him.

His thundering stare and the pressure on my throat silence me.

"There's only one way to stop what our families had started." This sick tradition. These men. Of course there is. It's him. James is more powerful than the three of them combined. "I was supposed to let someone kidnap you. A man who'd set you free, like I rescued the other ones. He'd make you disappear, give you enough money to live your happily ever after away from here. But, I couldn't go through with it. I don't even know what I'm doing. What I do know is this: no one will kill you. I'll hang their heads in my backyard before I let that happen."

For Topher, I was disposable, despite his sick torture fantasies. He let me go. Never put up a fight.

James, on the other hand, has been obsessed with me since the first dinner.

But he's still hiding something. By the look in his eyes, I can tell it's possessive. Dark. Unhinged.

I want it.

"Say it." I glare at him. "Fucking say it."

The grip on my throat tightens. He pins my body to the bed, his cock throbbing against my pussy.

"If anyone kills you, it's me who'll do it. And I won't. Ever."

That's the last warning I get before he draws back, flipping me onto my stomach. I have a split second to consider the meaning behind what he said. I'm sickened by how I find comfort in it. How my pussy aches to be filled by him.

Being murdered by a man who's that obsessed with me shouldn't be better than having him send me out of his home indefinitely. But it is better.

What's even better is he won't do either.

"Come here," he grunts, pulling my hips up. Forcing my legs apart.

When he's between them, his comforting weight presses to my back.

His hand is firm as it angles my head to the side. Softer when he tucks my hair behind my ear.

James holds me there, making me look at the wrath, determination, and lust on his face.

My stomach flutters; my lips part for him. I need him to kiss me. I need every part of him, the good, the bad, the psychotic. I need it on such a visceral level I could scream.

“James.”

“Not now, Ophelia.” Yes, yes now, because he can’t help himself. Briefly, his lips are on mine. His mouth is sucking the air out of me. “Not when I’m this close to snapping.”

“I wouldn’t mind it if you—”

“Shut up.” He’s up in a blink, sending pain throughout my body when he grabs fistfuls of my ass. I’m sore, and it hurts, but it’s him administering the pain. The only man in my life. “You’re going to let me fuck your pretty, virgin pussy. You’ll let me own you. Let me stretch you, make you cry. Make you scream my name. That’s what we’re going to do.”

I watch his abs ripple. His arm muscles flex, the veins accentuated like a work of art.

“Unless it’s more begging coming out of your mouth.” He takes himself out, grips his cock, lining himself up to my pussy. He’s barely an inch in, and I gasp. He’s so big that I don’t think I can take it. “You’re going to shut up.”

He runs his hands over the curve of my ass and traces them up to my hips.

“It’ll be painful, Ophelia.” His jaw tics. “Just like being obsessed with you hurts me.”

Emotion spears my body in half, then James shoves himself into me. Bottoms out. All the way in, every inch of him.

No sound comes out of me. I can’t scream, gasp, or cry. My mouth is open, only shock coursing through me. My head tries to make sense of this immense pain. This tearing sensation. Of how ruthless he’s being.

“Get out!” I drag myself an inch forward. He yanks me right back to where I was. “Get out! I don’t want it.”

Except I do. Except I moan, even when I try to escape him.

He stays there, buried inside me. His thick length pulses, swelling and stretching me. His blue eyes are near pitch black. He stares at me, offering no comfort. No affection. No recognition that I’m hurt.

I hate him.

I want him.

“Sonnet.”

Crack!

His hand on my ass is white-hot pain.

Crack!

“You’re forgetting your place.” He pulls me closer, drags himself halfway out, then bucks his hips. His cock goes so deep it’s impossible to catch my breath. “I own you.” James pulls out, barely, only to ram back harder into me. “You’re mine.”

“Please, stop.” It’s a lie. We both know it. I push my ass into him. I need him. My heart aches for him.

“You will do as I say.” Every word is a thrust. A vicious, ruthless thrust. “You’ll be a good girl.”

“I won’t ever be a good girl for you.” I press my fingers into the bed and give him more of me. Give him everything while I look back over my shoulder. “Ever.”

“Liar.”

His eyes slide down my back, my ass. To where we connect. It’s like watching a predator sink his teeth into his prey. There’s hunger there. An out-of-control, basic need. Through the pain and shame and hate, I feel it too.

“Oh, fuck.” James slows the roll of his hips, but he goes deeper. The pain and pleasure intensify. My lust is earth-shattering. “Your blood on my cock. Fuck, Ophelia. *Fuck*. I own you. Your pussy is mine. Your life is mine. You’ll never be anyone else’s. Fucking no one’s.”

“Never yours, either.”

“No.” *Crack!* “Don’t you dare say it. You’re so wet for this. You’re such a slut for my dick. Taking it, *fuck*, like such a good, filthy girl. Don’t you dare lie to me.”

Our bodies make the most obscene slapping sounds every time he pushes into me. A shiver runs through my legs, through every part of me. I more than need him. I breathe for him. I’m this close to coming.

James takes me even closer and closer to that edge for so long that I forget how to speak. I forget my own name.

When it gets too much, when I clench around him and scream his name, he’s there.

A hand around my nape. Another one between my thighs, rubbing, pinching. Pleasuring.

“I’m going to fuck babies into you.” His eyes are my entire world. His body is my home. I feel it. I know it. “But not before you come all over my cock, Ophelia.”

I release a moan so visceral that I hardly recognize my own voice.

“Please.” *Please, let me stay. Please, fix this. Us. Please, please, please.*

“That’s it. That’s my good girl.” His touch is electrifying. His words are harsh and hot, sending me over the edge. A rope snaps, and pleasure spreads throughout me. “Look at you. Coming for me like that. When I’m balls deep inside your cunt. When I hurt you. When I defile you. God, you’re filthy. My filthy girl. Fucking mine.”

Pummeling into me harder, he comes with my name on his lips. He looks furious, unhinged, and possessive.

He looks like the man who owns me.

“Yours,” I whisper, feeling my sanity tearing at the seams. Life wasn’t supposed to turn out this way. Somehow, though, this insanity is perfect. This is where I’m supposed to be. “Yours.”

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21

JAMES

Order.

If anyone were ever to sum up my life in one word, that would be it.

Order was what brought me into this world. I'd been raised to maintain it.

Order is why I followed in my father's footsteps and went to law school. Why the initiation was forced on me. Why I had Topher.

Even the secret kidnappings, saving the other women, I'd been meticulous about those. Secretive.

When I decided there'd be a new kind of order, I went after my father. I didn't get to kill him the way I planned, but that was a bump in the road. The how didn't matter as long as he and Oliver's father were dead, and neither of us were caught.

The shell company I used to pay for Ophelia? There are twenty of those. Twenty well-thought-out secrets spread throughout the world.

Stopping this vicious cycle before more murder and rape ensued has been on my mind for the past year.

Until recently, the plan had been perfectly organized, like everything I do.

Then I moved Ophelia out of her cell. Into my bed.

Into my life.

This, having my heart trip over itself, her blood on my cock—her lips repeating the word *yours*—none of this was supposed to happen.

This is the definition of a mess. Of calamity.

Of chaos.

Nothing's been planned about this. Everything's out of order.

This is a head-on collision.

And I embrace it. This anarchy.

Her.

"That's right." I flip her onto her back, pushing every bit of my cum that's dripping down her thighs back inside her. She's warm and tight and sensitive, moaning at the invasion. "You are mine. You won't always like it. Sometimes, you'll hate it. I am not a good man. I don't know how to treat you like you deserve. All I know is I'm never letting you go. Ever."

"You…" Her eyes are hooded. She moans and writhes. Tries to scoot back while letting me keep her close. "You are. Were. For them. For me. Good, I mean."

This isn't the time to discuss this, the entirety of my plan. She's not ready. I'm still contemplating some of my next moves.

"Quiet, Ophelia."

Her lips press together softly when she obeys me. The rest of her face—furrowed brow, scrunched nose—tells a different story. I've upset her. She'd better get used to it.

"I see you're choosing not to listen, so I'll tell you again. I'm a bad man. Rotten down to the core." I flatten my hand on her navel, tracing it up her body. Curling it around her throat. "This monster owns you. Every part of you. I took your sweet little cunt when you said no. Sure, deep down, you were desperate for it. Didn't change the fact that I *took* from you."

I'm being vile. Degrading. She arches toward me regardless, pure and sweet and so fucking feral. Taming her would be hot. Watching her roam free is even hotter.

I'm about to have both.

After she learns this lesson, where I show her just what a motherfucker I am.

Then we can move forward.

"Your fear, I'm going to have more of that by the end of the night."

"Yours." Her hooded eyes glimmer. Challenging me. "Yours."

Can't take it anymore. I give in to the need that presses into my ribs. Crash my lips to her swollen ones and kiss her. Even that feels like warfare between us. Tongues and teeth and grunts.

I yank myself from her, and she growls at me. Grabs the sides of my face, her slender fingers digging into me.

“You’ll regret this.” And I won’t give a fuck. Possessing her isn’t a question of *if* anymore. It isn’t a question at all. It’s a fact. “Once I claim your last virgin hole. Your flesh. Your life.”

“Do it.” Ophelia, brave and slightly unhinged, pulls me to her again.

I refuse her. Stay right where I am, snuffing out the need to fuck the attitude out of her.

She has no idea what she’s asking for.

I have no idea what we’re doing here. Not really.

Keep her, keep her, keep her.

Despite everything, I will.

Her defiance is maddening. She lights up parts of me I never knew existed. My head throbs, this onslaught of desire growing intolerable by the second.

They make no sense.

Lies. One of them does. One of them is familiar.

“You don’t get to demand anything, property.” Her nails dig into my skin, and I welcome the pain. It helps clear my head. Unfortunate for Ophelia, since I’m at my worst like this. “You can only obey.”

With my hand around her throat, I drag her out of the bed.

The days she spent in the cell have left their mark on Ophelia, the same as they have on me. I wasn’t supposed to have her here, in my room.

She wasn’t supposed to say, “Yes,” then release her grip on me and kneel just because I pushed her to her knees.

Yet here we are. Large dark eyes stare at me from the floor. At my cock, that’s hard again.

“You’ll start by cleaning this mess.” I point at the blood on my length.

Her cheeks flush, but her hand comes up, regardless.

“No,” I quip.

She flinches the moment I grab her wrist. “What did I do?”

No answer. I run my finger along one side of my cock, getting cum and blood on my fingertip.

“When I say clean it up.” One soft cheek and then the other have red streaks on them. I coat my fingertip in her blood again, smearing it on her parted lips. “I mean, use your mouth. Your tongue. Or that’s the end of the road for you.”

“You won’t kill me,” she snarls. Naked. Hair wild. Subdued. But not at a disadvantage. “I’ve seen your home. Heard about your business. You take care of the things you own. I get it now.”

She’s not wrong.

Too bad I’m not here to be kind or indulge her. Not tonight.

My hand is in her hair. “You think you’re so clever, don’t you?”

Fuck, she’s such a good girl for opening her mouth. I hate how it draws me deeper into her. Hate how she must see it on my face. She darts her tongue out to lick her lips and tease me.

I’m losing parts of me to her.

“I treat my properties however I damn well please.” I pull on the roots of her hair, yanking her face up. Hurting her for what she does to me. “Now suck your blood off me. And Ophelia?”

Her shallow breaths and obedient gaze are the only responses I get. The only ones I need.

“Try swallowing it before I’ve had a taste, and you’ll be spending the next twenty-four hours in your cell.”

She makes a whimpering sound in the back of her throat. Then I fill her pretty mouth with my cock that’s hardening again. I shove her face into my groin and watch her gag.

“Fuck.” I press her to me. “So good. You should’ve never been this good. Fuck.”

At first, she can’t do anything but fight to breathe. She stares up at me, her eyes watery. Pleading.

“You begged me to take you. Make you mine.” As impossible as it may seem, I force her to take more of me. Thrust my hips into her. The head of my cock hits the back of her throat, and she coughs for me. Moans for me. “I warned you that you’d regret it.”

Her breathing evens out, but her nails dig harder into my thighs. She’s doing her best, taking me in earnest. Drooling for me. Fighting to survive this without swallowing.

“Was I right?” I’m being cruel, sliding my hand to the back of her head. Massaging her, comforting her while I’m choking her with my dick. “Do you? Regret asking to be mine? Not like your answer will make any difference. I own you. You’ll always be mine. I’m just curious.”

“No.” The world is garbled. “No.” Again. Not regretting it. “Never.” Her tongue moves on me as she speaks.

Fuck.

I cock an eyebrow, pretending this does absolutely nothing to me. “I remember telling you to lick something.”

Something barely leaves my mouth before Ophelia flattens her tongue on my cock. This girl. Fuck it all to hell. She knows. She’s learned what I like. What makes an electric current shoot up my spine and damn near blind me.

“Enough.”

It’s an effort to tear her off me. To glower at her when she’s being better than anything I’ve ever owned. This mansion. My law firm. My legacy. Nothing has or will ever bring me as much pleasure as her.

Nothing will ever be as addictive as her need to please me. To have me.

Me. The real person underneath the titles, the influence, the layers.

She’s stripped me bare, has witnessed the worst of me. She’s desperate to have me still.

Me.

That’s what she gets. I lift her by her hair, bending until we’re at eye level. Her lips are red, swollen, and pinched together. Cheeks slightly puffed.

Then she opens her mouth. Pokes out her blood-stained tongue.

An offering.

“You’ll be the end of me.” The confession pummels out of me. I don’t get a say in it. Can’t find it in me to care that she looks at me as if I hung the damn moon. “I won’t rest until I become your everything.”

Pressing my mouth to hers, tasting me and her together, is the only thing that matters. Rubbing my tongue against hers is how I’ll survive this. Her.

My pulse kicks up, my heart infuriated that I let someone in like that.

Fuck my pulse. Fuck the world. Fuck this heart in my chest that screams that this is wrong.

She’s here. Her blood and our orgasms are fresh on her tongue. Her lips. I’ve never understood why my clients say they lost control. When they try to describe how a switch flipped inside them, and they became more animal than human.

This taste, though. This fucking taste and how willing she is, my fucked-up little thing. The woman who told me *no* and now moans into my mouth, dragging her nails over my chest.

I bite her lip and get a fresh taste of her blood on my tongue. Devour her voice as she screams into my mouth. Pull her closer as she wriggles, hoping to escape.

“You’ll get your chance to scream tonight, Ophelia.” I step back, pulling on my briefs and sweatpants.

Her hands fall to her sides as she stands there, panting. Stunned at the abrupt separation.

“You’re getting dressed?” It’s adorable, the way she says it. Naked and sad and hopeful.

In the dim light of the room, she stands out like a beacon. Like a star in the night sky.

The need to snuff out her light so that no one else will get to enjoy it is overwhelming.

Except I won’t.

I’ll destroy everyone else before they even dare come near her instead.

I’ll make sure she never forgets just how mine she is.

“Ah. So needy for my cock already.” I shake my head. Take a couple of steps back toward the windows.

“You.” Her eyebrows knit. The distance wounds her as much as it does me. “I need you.”

“You’ll have me.” On any other man’s lips, it would’ve been a promise. On mine, it’s a threat. “You’ll have so much of me that you’ll be begging me to leave you.”

“Never.” Her mouth moves, her voice only a whisper. She doesn’t mean for me to hear it. She knows I will anyway. It kills her, how damaged both of us are.

And I’m just getting started.

“You have until I count to one hundred.” My arms cross over my bare chest.

Her eyes dart to the movement, then back at me. “To do what?”

“To run, Ophelia.” When my head tilts to the side, a shiver goes through her. “Isn’t that what you’ve been trying to do since day one?”

“I…” The corners of her mouth curve down. Her fingertips rise to one cheek where I smeared blood and cum on her. “You’re letting me go?”

“You’re putting words in my mouth again.”

Her thighs clench at my detached tone. She’s getting off on the humiliation. “I am.”

“I said run. I also said that you had until I counted down to a hundred. Meaning, I’m…” I scratch my scruff, pretending to consider this. “At seventy-five now. I promise you, you’ll regret it if you’re here when I get to zero.”

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22

JAMES

I'm not sure what makes her sprint out the door. The threat in my voice. A desire to get out of this place. A survival instinct.

As I hear her footsteps pounding down the hallway, then the staircase, I smile. Neither of the options is why she's running.

I scare her, sure. Fuck, the things I've done to her are awful. The things I have planned for her are worse.

But she was right. She's my property. I do take care of what's mine.

She is exactly that, mine.

I crave her with every fiber of my being. From the first moment she walked into my home, I've been biding my time. I see that now. Having her, keeping her, this was how it was supposed to end.

Bam!

Bam!

Bam!

Her fist must slam on the locked front door. "Help!"

My lips tick up. My feet itch to follow her. To have front row seats to her feeble attempts at getting away.

All part of our game.

A few miles of driveway, trees, and greenery separate us from the outside world. My staff is gone for the week, though they wouldn't have helped her, either.

Not to mention she'll have to pick the elaborate lock on the front door first.

That why she’s running. She wants to play this game, knowing she’ll lose.

Wanting to lose.

I’m so fucking gone for her.

“Help! Somebody get me out of here!”

I tread closer to the door to hear her better. Her feet hit the floor at lightning speed. She’s once again on the run, this time darting across the main floor in the other direction. Toward the other rooms.

Where the expansive windows are.

Clever as she is beautiful, my little sonnet.

“Fifty.” Though I don’t shout, Ophelia’s reaction is a scream.

Fuck if the sound doesn’t reach all the way down to my balls.

Something heavy crashes against the glass. Could be one of the end tables, by the sound of it. Nothing too heavy.

“Forty.”

The naked woman in my house sprints across the floor again. Her footfalls are light. Sweet, like her.

I spend about five seconds imagining her ass and tits and hair swaying as she runs. As fear and excitement and fight take over her.

A second crash. The sound echoing around the house is different. Metal hitting glass.

My unbreakable windows.

“Fuck.”

“Thirty.” I haven’t been counting. I call the number out anyway. Her anxious energy bleeds across my home. It’s intoxicating.

Soon enough, she’ll pay for making me weak for her.

No, I tell myself as I slowly descend the stairs, my steps loud enough for her to hear me coming. *This won’t be a punishment. It’ll be a pleasure.*

“Twenty.”

“No!”

Before I enter the living room, where the breaking and huffing sounds emanate from, I stop by my den. Open the ten-by-ten safe behind my desk, extract the item that was delivered to me this morning, lock the safe, and head out.

“The damn thing won’t break.” She’s completely in her element, focused on thrashing the metal fire tongs into the window. “This house is—Argh!”

It’s obvious she doesn’t hear me enter the living room. By the time she will, it’ll be too late.

It’ll be exactly the right moment.

I’m aware of how sick I am. How far gone. The flames that crackle in the fireplace—the ones I started before I returned upstairs to devour her—are a testament to that.

Nothing to do about it. No way to fix me.

Highly likely that neither Ophelia nor I are interested in that.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The other doors in the house are as tightly locked as the front door. Ophelia must realize it. She’s putting everything she has into bashing this window with my antique metal tongs.

I stroke my hard cock as I lean my hip against one of the leather couches. Six feet from Ophelia and to the right. Hiding in plain sight, where she won’t see my reflection in the window.

She’s breathtaking in her attempts to break free, as she tries to please me.

The muscles of her legs, back, and arms flex whenever she rears her hands back, then flings herself into the window. Her hair is such a beautiful mess from fucking her earlier.

This game means something to her.

I mean something to her.

“Zero.”

Her shrill scream is followed by the metal tongs landing on the floor.

“You.” She whips back to me, fire in her eyes. Red spreads across her cheeks. Her neck. Her tits. Everything’s on fire. Her hands clutch into fists at her sides, and God. Fuck. She walks backward until her back hits the window she just tried to break. My sweet little prey. “You cheated.”

“Me?” I push myself off the couch. Ophelia flattens her palms against the window as she walks along the wall. Away from me. Feeding my desires, my sickness. “I told you to run. Said I’d count down from a hundred.”

“Where would I have run? There’s no getting out of here.” Her eyes narrow as she growls the accusation. “You knew, and you let me try anyway. Is that why you’re hard? You get off on making me look like a fool?”

“You don’t look like a fool. And I would never. Come here.”

She hasn’t noticed what I have in my left hand. I prowl toward her, releasing the handle of the branding iron, only to throw it in the air and grip the center of it.

“Is this…” That gets her attention. That turns her flushed cheeks pale, making the blood smears on her cheeks stand out. She ducks to pick the metal tongs off the floor. She straightens her spine, wielding it at me. “You’ll beat me up? For failing?”

My eyebrows shoot up my forehead. “Of course not.”

“What’s this for, then?” A couple of steps back, and she’s near the doorway leading to the kitchen.

The kind thing to do—the decent thing to do—would be to comfort her. She’s desperate to be mine. Does her best to please me.

I’m insanely obsessed with owning every part of her.

But since I’m neither kind nor decent…

“When I say come here, I don’t mean raise your voice at me. What I mean is come. Here.”

“Don’t you dare hit me.” She passes the threshold into the kitchen, wielding her makeshift weapon. “I’ll kill you. I swear. I can take a lot of things, James. I enjoy many things.” Her breath catches. What embarrasses Ophelia gets me really fucking hard. “Beat me up, and I’ll ruin you.”

The space that she’s put between us is only there because I allow it. I hold very still, feeding off her fear. I never possessed anything as remotely as mouth-watering as Ophelia.

“Come. Here.”

Her nipples peak, chest heaving. “James.”

The flames crackle in the fireplace, a background noise to my pounding heart.

“Sonnet.”

Lightning flashes in the sky. The burst of light illuminates her determined face for a second. Then comes thunder.

“I bet you’re wet.” Raindrops patter against the window. Picking up speed. Sleet joins them. “Soaked. Why deny yourself of this?”

“I don’t know what *this* is, but I’m not wet for it.” Shadows hide her from me as she backs further into the kitchen. Still pinning her body to the wall.

“What is it, dirty girl?” I take two steps forward having to be near her. “Is it the metal handle? It is, isn’t it? You just lost your virginity and now

you’re imagining this”—I tap it against my leg—“in your tight cunt. Open your legs for me. Let me see how right I am.”

“You’re sick.”

I’m done playing games; that’s what I am.

She shrieks as I pounce toward her. I’m silent and determined, prying the metal tongs out of her grip. I hook an arm around her naked waist and drag her to the living room, her back pressed to my chest.

“James.” Arms and legs fly in the air. I get a kick in the shin. A finger—almost—in my eye. “James, let me go.”

“You’re mine.” The simple fact silences her. She still kicks me. “I’m not going to hit you. I’m going to make it official.”

The kicking stops too. We’re a few feet from the fireplace when she turns her head to me. “You haven’t proposed.”

Christ, she’s adorable. I bet she would’ve said yes. If I were any other man, I probably would’ve asked. The thought jars me, but there’s nothing to do about it.

“Marriage is overrated. A wedding even more so. Calling in a priest. An official. Couple of witnesses. Ridiculously big ceremonies.” Truth is, I never cared to think about my wedding day. I knew I wouldn’t have one. “A commitment before God, the city hall or the government. A farce that ends with fifty percent of them getting divorced.”

She remains silent for the few seconds it takes us to reach the fireplace.

Then I stop, glaring at her in complete silence.

“What do you want?” Her question is a frustrated scream when I say nothing.

My cock jerks at her new wave of terror. I turn her around then tighten my grip around her while.

“What do you want?” Again, this time, it’s more of a sigh.

“You.” I twist us together until she’s facing the fireplace and so do I, thrusting the branding iron into the fire. “You’re an obsession. A snake. A terminal illness.”

“I hate you.” Tears streak down her cheeks. Some land on my arm.

“No, you don’t.” I press my lips to her neck and groan at her raging pulse. “What we have is sick, unnatural. Obsession is a mild word for it, isn’t it?”

Her sobbing recedes. The tears slow.

“Talk to me.”

She nods, and the wetness runs onto my skin.

“What we have was never meant to happen.” The backing of the branding iron should be heated by now. I pull it out and away from the flames. “Life is cruel. Fate is crueler. And you…”

“What? I’m what?” Her focus darts to the heated branding iron. She doesn’t put up a fight when I manhandle her to her hands and knees. She lets me, trembling and hot and a sin. A terrible one. “I’m what, James?”

Her hair hides her face, so I swipe it to the side and over her other shoulder.

Better. I tower over her. The branding iron is at a safe distance away from her face. “You’re stuck with me.”

Ophelia’s consent isn’t necessary. For thirty million dollars, I became the owner of the most beautiful, precious, addicting thing this world has to offer. A walking, talking, and fucking seduction.

Nonetheless, I search her eyes. Wait for them to land back on me.

“I’m cattle to you,” she says to herself, looking at me without really seeing anything. “Cattle.”

“No.” She’ll only ever be as deeply humiliated as I let her. Being compared to livestock isn’t my purpose. This branding means another thing entirely. “You’re mine. There’s a difference.”

“I shouldn’t be into this.” Her fingers claw at the floor beneath her. “I don’t even know you. You fucking bought me.”

“True.” I move the branding iron out of her sight, squatting next to her. “It changes nothing. I’ll never have a heart. You’ll always be drawn to the darkness. We were meant to find each other. We’re fucked-up and twisted, and *wrong*. Yet you can’t help but think I’m the right person for you.”

“You’re going to brand me, then.” Hope fills her eyes. My unhinged monologue did that to her. “Because I’m yours. Forever.”

“I can’t imagine a life without you any more than I can imagine one without air.”

Self-preservation screams at me for these things I’m telling her. I would’ve been better off if I had sent her to an undisclosed location. Destroyed the monstrosity my ancestors started without this mess, without ruining everything for both of us.

Impossible.

I watch her, her wide eyes and blood and tear-stained cheeks. Obsession and longing are written all over her face.

I don’t know how to love her. I only know how to never let her go.

“You’re serious.” She blows out a breath, turning, still on her hands and knees, until we face each other. “You’re actually serious.”

“I always am. I’m keeping you.” I get up and dip the branding iron a second time into the fire, where the backing with my initials on it heats up. “I’m marking you.”

Her gaze follows my movements. Her chin wobbles. “Don’t leave me in the cell after that. Please. This, *us*, it isn’t meaningless.”

“You’ll be chained again.” I’m being brutally honest. I’ll never lie to her. “Never in the cell, though.”

A promise like that should never put a smile on a person’s face.

Unless, of course, it’s my person. “Okay.”

That’s the last thing she says before I lift the branding iron and lower it to her left shoulder blade.

Ear-piercing screams. Shaking body.

She doesn’t fall to the floor. She’ll never fall when I’m here to catch her. I throw the branding iron into the fire. Wrap an arm around her middle and hug her to my body.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her dark eyes catching mine, glistening with tears. “Thank you.”

Before I get to tell her she’s welcome, Ophelia passes out.

I cradle her in my lap, stroking her cheeks and running my fingers through her hair.

She’s there, unmoving.

Wearing my mark on her back.

My initials on her skin.

She’s never getting away from me.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

The word plays on repeat in my head as I get up and carry her to our bedroom.

I should take her to a room where I have a first-aid kit within reach. Like the kitchen or the guest bathroom on the main floor. The two other the bathrooms on the second one.

But branding her means something to me. It symbolizes our eternal bond. A promise. A vow that only happens once.

Unlike the initiation, this is one ritual I'll cherish for the rest of my life.

Our bedroom it is.

Ophelia's weight is light and welcomed in my arms on the way up. I regret losing that connection when I place her face down on the bed. Her hair, I have to touch it. Thread my fingers through it. So I do, before I gently tuck it away from her face and new scar.

God, her dried tears are beautiful.

Her mangled skin even more so. Unable to stay away, I press my lips to her new scar, running my tongue along it. Tasting her. Comforting her while she's blacked out.

Leaving her here isn't right. We both could use a bath, so that's where we go. Once the tub is full and I make sure the water isn't too hot, I settle both of us in here like I did the last time she was passed out.

I squirt liquid soap on my hand and run it over her body, her breasts. Between her thighs. Her dark hair is softer by the time I'm done shampooing and conditioning it. I take great care not to touch her new wound as I clean myself up after her.

Back on the bed. I'm not at her side for less than a minute before I return with the first-aid kit. I clean her with the antibiotic ointment and bandage her.

I stay in place, absorbing her beauty. This moment.

Inhaling her scent, I run my fingertips along the curve of her back. Her skin prickles wherever I touch her. I allow myself to believe that, on a deeper level, she's aware. That she's comforted by it even though her eyes are closed.

"Good girl." I kiss the small of her back, right above her crack.

The clothes come next. The softest cotton long-sleeve T-shirt and a pair of sleep pants from her closet are what I choose for her, both gray. Then I pull on a dark blue T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

I need to review some things, and there's no way I'm leaving her here by herself.

She won't wake up to a cold bed.

I'm sickened by the sweet thought.

I listen to it, scooping Ophelia in my arms and taking her to the den.

With me.

ROWAN: *The target's secure. Texts, movements, behavior are the same—nothing new to report.*

The message from the private investigator I flew out to Ibiza soothes me. I place the phone down, raising my gaze to Ophelia.

Peaceful, sleeping Ophelia.

My fingers tap on the desk in my den, mirroring the rhythm of the rain as it lands on the windows.

The sight of her curled up on the couch, her back to me, tugs at my cold heart.

Detaching myself from her, I return to the task at hand.

The files that I have spread across my desk. I removed them from my safe earlier, right after I settled Ophelia on the couch.

Then I got down to business.

My personal business.

Starting with my son.

Topher had been sticking to his routine, according to my investigator. There haven't been any more pitiful messages or calls since our last conversation.

Oliver sent me photos of him and Camden from their vacation, much to my disgust. I have never taken a selfie in my life. I don't care to have Oliver's on my phone. But I pretended to be content and supportive.

Another layer of my plan.

Putting up a charade will serve me in the long run.

When I kill them. Make them disappear.

Then I act as if I'm concerned about their well-being.

As if we were more than just business partners, and I'm personally invested in bringing them home.

What about Topher? His fate remains undecided.

He's a monster. He was also drunk when he talked to me.

I'll try to talk to Topher once Oliver and Camden are out of the picture. Or I could end him too. Depends on him.

Everyone's disposable.

My hand clenches into a fist.

Everyone but her.

The folders in front of me contain names, photos, and extortion material. Over the last six months, I've been gathering the ones I'll need in case shit hits the fan.

One can never be too careful.

I might not have murdered anyone in a long time.

But I'm not new to *this*. To keeping people—as in myself—out of prison using my connections. And that's before I delve into actual law practice.

"Hmph."

My head whips to the source of the sound. To Ophelia.

The hold she has on me is concerning. How, with a simple *hmph* and a shift of her body, she snatches my attention. Fully. Completely.

Obsessively.

"Pet."

If I get up, if I cross the room and cradle her in my arms, it's game over. She's already halfway there, to ruling over my heart.

Another tug of the invisible rope, and she'll have an edge over me.

Not yet.

I stay seated. Fold my hands on my lap.

And watch her.

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23

OPHELIA

What pulls me out of my sleep isn't the fact that I'm well-rested.

I'm nowhere near energized or alive.

Exhausted is what I am.

Heavy limbs. Heavier eyelids.

My shoulder blade.

The area over it burns, or more like tingles. A constant hum running along my back.

That's why I woke up in the dead of night. On this couch, I think. It definitely isn't James's bed. Or the one in the cell. Thank God for that.

I can't remember how I got here, what this constant pressure on my back is, or why my shoulder blade doesn't move freely.

Why I have a pad on it.

Then they hit me, the flashbacks.

James fucking me. James hunting me down. Terrorizing me. Comforting me.

Owning me.

Branding me.

And I thanked him for it. The words were just there, on my tongue. Couldn't take them back if I wanted to.

I don't.

My new reality is better than I could've ever imagined.

We could have that all the time. We could be a couple. Two broken people who make sense together.

Being a part of his life is the best thing that has ever happened to me.

Being his.

He might have secrets. He's also cruel, psychotic, and unpredictable.

But he was made for me. I was made for him.

Every desire I've had that I couldn't name, it's him.

"Pet."

This isn't *Sonnet*, nor is it *Ophelia* or *property*.

Pet.

He's starting to warm up to me.

Even the room senses it, the temperature rising at the change of his voice. The change in *him*.

This isn't flames crackling in the fireplace. It's got nothing to do with the heated floors.

It's him.

"Come here."

The impulse to get up and run to him is immense. I won't. I have to play it smart. There's so much about him that I still don't know. So many secrets. Layers that need peeling.

Giving myself to him with abandon could be dangerous. He could choose to keep me in the dark. I'm not afraid that he would; I'd just really rather he wouldn't.

"Hey." I sit on the couch, my feet resting on the soft rug.

We're in the den, I see it now. Topher showed me the room the first time I was here.

"Ophelia." He's seated behind his desk. Big. Imposing. Regal. There are bookshelves behind him. The fireplace is to his right. A wet bar at the corner of the room. And him. His presence shuts the world out. "You're making a habit of defying me. We're supposed to be past the point of punishing you. Especially while you're healing. I will punish you, though. Trust that I will if you don't come here right this second."

It's criminal for a man to be this mesmerizing when he's threatening me. But James is. James nails it.

Another surge of warmth bursts inside my chest. I tug on the hem of this shirt that isn't mine. Scrape my teeth along my bottom lip.

His icy cold eyes zone in on the movement.

Yes.

Yes.

“So…” I start. He leans forward an inch. Barely. “You’ll punish me if I stay here, on the couch. Does that mean you’ll reward me if I obey?”

“Hmm.” His lips press into a thin line. “You’re negotiating. Last I checked, properties aren’t allowed to bargain.” He gestures toward the room. “The fire warms me without asking for anything in return. This couch, it doesn’t tell me it’s doing me a favor by letting you sit on it.”

My thighs clench at his impassive voice. At the degradation.

“I’m going to go out on a limb here and guess you haven’t fucked the fireplace. Or this couch.” I drag my toes over the rug. “Did you ever come in them? On them?”

The slightest hint of a smile curls his lips up. I get less than a second to witness it. “Your point being?”

I haven’t realized he’s been crossing the room. He has, and he’s here, before me, with his hands on my waist, helping me up.

Infuriating man, so hot in a plain T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

“That you fucked me.” Heat rushes up my neck. My cheeks burn. “I have your cum in my pussy. I’m sore, James. *You* fucked—”

James crashes his lips to mine. Locks my throat in his hands. He groans, kissing me hard like he’s fighting me. Like he’s fighting himself.

“What an insolent piece of property I bought for myself.” Our foreheads press together, and one of his hands delves into my hair. Pulling me back. Stopping me from finding his lips again, from getting another soul-stealing kiss. “You’re lucky, though, pet.”

“Why?” I grab his T-shirt. Tug on it to drag him to me. He won’t budge an inch. “Because I’m the only one you branded? Or were there others? Should I be jealous of the armchair in your bedroom?”

“No, I don’t brand my armchairs. Or any other furniture.” I’m being swooped off the ground. It doesn’t go unnoticed that his hands and arms aren’t touching my wound. That he’s taking extra care not to hurt me. “I do find it adorable that you’re jealous. I told you before. You shouldn’t be.”

His words, as he carries me to the chair behind his desk, are sweet. Really sweet.

The voice with which he says them is the same as always. Cold. Detached. What a constant mind-fuck. What a thrilling roller coaster.

“Of anyone?”

“Of anyone.” We’re seated in his wide leather chair, where he cradles me in his lap. He strokes my thighs, supporting me by bracing his arm

around my back. “How are you?”

I’ve been asked this question numerous times over the years. Never like this. He truly cares, is truly curious, and it’s shocking. Tears spring from my eyes. I’m working hard on reining them in.

“I’m…I’m fine.”

A nod. “Your back?”

“You scarred me.”

“We discussed this.” He hugs me deeper into his warmth. “I branded you. You’re mine.”

“Then you patched me up.”

“In our bedroom.”

Our.

A chill runs up my spine. I don’t let it show. “You wiped me clean and dressed me up.”

“And bathed you before that.”

“You carried me into this room.”

“The den,” he confirms. “Yes.”

“You were about to tell me something about yourself when you called me over here.” I sneak a glance at the desk. At the neatly arranged folders spread on top of it. All of them are closed. “Right?”

“You’re right. And to…” He clears his throat, firming the mask of impassiveness on his face. “Hold you.”

It’s my turn to nod. To let him talk.

Anything but show how deeply it affects me.

I’m afraid that if I do, this moment could burst into flames.

I like this moment just fine.

“Opening up…I don’t do that.” He rearranges me so my shoulder burrows deeper into his chest, then brushes my hair behind my back. He’s hard beneath me. Violent, sexual energy bleeds from him, yet he remains stoic, glaring down at me. “I locked away parts of my past and haven’t allowed anyone near them.”

The way he emphasizes the word, *anyone*. My eyes widen. My eyebrows go up.

My heart is about to explode.

“Anyone,” he repeats. “But I’m sharing them with you. I want you to know.”

“I’m listening.” This is important. The pain in my back has subsided, and my entire attention is focused on James.

“First and foremost. I never raped a woman in my life.” His fingers trace paths along my arm. “You already know that I sent people to rescue the others. Well, not all of them. I couldn’t save Camden’s mother from Oliver. That one was beyond my reach, unfortunately.”

“But you tried? Even though she was locked up at *his* place?” I stare. I blink. I dig my fingers into his neck. When did they get there?

“Yes. The man I sent was the best one out there, and he said it wasn’t possible. At least I had Topher’s mom nearby. I felt personally responsible for her, so I rescued her.” His eyes go somewhere inside him for a moment. “There were many side doors and hidden pathways in my father’s house. A few of them lead to underground tunnels. Just in case one of the people he extorted ever tried to get back at him. When he ordered me to kill her, I fired at the bed she delivered our son on. The blood from the birth was enough proof. After that, I smuggled her out through one of the tunnels and gave her a briefcase containing over two million dollars in cash. Money I’d collected throughout her pregnancy. Told her to run and never look back. Never tell me where she was and to forget about Topher. That I’d keep him safe.”

Jealousy, hot and humiliating, detonates inside of me. “You said you didn’t like her.”

“I also said you shouldn’t be jealous.” He shakes his head, moving his hand from beneath my thighs to grab my chin. “I felt nothing but sympathy for her. No love, no attraction. Nothing. She was the one who’d been chasing me. When my father told me it was time, I went for it. Once I told her what had to be done, she agreed. She begged me to go through with it, to choose her. She trusted that we would figure it out later. Oliver and I couldn’t go against our fathers before our sons were born. They had to come to this world so our fathers would give us the combination to their safes. Where they hid their secrets. Their power. Without that, it would’ve been a free-for-all. Oliver and I would’ve been taken down. The wealthy and corrupt enjoyed the services our families offered. But we’ve been holding on to too many secrets for far too long. Take that away, and we’re as good as dead.”

A chill seeps beneath my clothes. I scoot closer to him.

“Anyway, I couldn’t and wouldn’t sleep with Topher’s mom.” His thumb on my jaw rubs my numb skin. “I snuck in a doctor to do an artificial insemination. Even though she pleaded with me to do it, I couldn’t. It wasn’t right. What was right was being kind to her while she was carrying our son. She asked for affection, and I’d done my best. Sat by her bed for hours so long as I didn’t raise my father’s suspicions. Made sure she got the food she craved. Keeping her happy was easy. Mainly because she didn’t know the only reason she stayed alive was because she was carrying a boy in her womb.”

“Why did it have to be a boy?”

At that, he frowns. “The women who carry daughters are murdered. Women aren’t part of our families.”

“Okay.” I’m not sure what to say to that. Of course it’s insane, wrong, and the most awful thing I’ve ever heard. I also wish he’d tell me more. That he’d trust me.

I want to be this monster’s person.

“She swore to me she wouldn’t come back. She lied. Couldn’t help herself.” No emotion registers on his face. I can tell there’s regret there, hiding. Lurking. “One month. One month and she was back.”

“For Topher?” Their son. James’s son with the other poor woman who I can’t stop envying. Fuck.

“Yes.” His chest expands. There it is. There’s the regret. “I spent the night in the campus library. Oliver and I pretended to study. We were finalizing the details of our plan when she arrived at my father’s home. Banged on the door. My father got it. He was the one who killed her. He waited for me to come back. Had a gun aimed at my head as soon as I stepped into the living room. I was younger. Faster and more prepared. I carried a gun tucked it in my jeans, always. He ended up shooting me in the chest. I blew his brains out.”

“How did you survive?” When he says it like this, while he’s staring at me so intently, it’s as if I’m watching a movie. I splay my hands over his chest, stopping the invisible bleeding.

“Bulletproof clothes.” He shrugs as if everyone has them. *Right*. “As I mentioned, I’d been prepared. After that, I texted Oliver that the plans had changed. He went after his father that night. His reasons for killing his dad were different than mine, though. It had nothing to do with Camden’s mom. She was already buried by the time we killed our fathers.”

The conversation about Oliver is for another day. There will be another day. For tonight, James is the one person I care about. Him and me.

"Your clothes are bulletproof? All of them?" My hands keep putting pressure on his chest. He grabs one, raises it close to his mouth, and squeezes. His lips brush over my knuckles, comforting me despite himself. "Do we have them on now?"

"Not now." His gaze is strangely open. "I have a few sets in my closet. So do you."

"Clothes? You mean more than just my panties?"

"Yes. You have a closet full of them. Like the pants you have on now. They were bought especially for you. All your clothes were."

I have to kiss him. It's stupid and reckless to fall for such a calculated, wicked killing machine. I'm an idiot for pulling myself up and pressing my lips to his, for letting him bite me until I yelp.

I shouldn't be thankful that he's alive.

I am.

"No one's reported the other sacrifices missing?" I ask once he puts me back.

"No, for many reasons. The main one, I assume, would be to not mess with us. There are no refunds. And no one would threaten to expose us since it'd expose them too."

Hope and wonder make me lightheaded. "So…Baylor is actually out there? You meant what you said about kidnapping her."

He looks genuinely perplexed at the name. "Who?"

"Camden's…" I won't say *sacrifice* again. Fuck this.

"Oh, her." He's careful without being gentle in the slightest, the way he's handling me. Arranging me to straddle him on the chair. "Yes, I managed to save all the sacrifices."

"Thank you." I sling my arms around his neck. Hug him for everything I'm worth, pressing my cheek to his chest. "What's next? Where is everyone? Oliver and the rest of them? Why aren't you going to the office?"

"You ask a lot of questions, pet."

"You know everything about me. It's only fair."

"I admire your persistence." He reaches behind me for something in the drawer of his desk. "How you lie to yourself about us being equals."

I can tell it's a game. A serious one, though. James is taking this—taking *me*—very seriously.

He’s relieved to reveal this side of himself.

But he also knows doing so is crossing a line.

He obviously couldn’t trust his dad. He can’t trust Oliver, either. The man who raped and killed Camden’s mother.

None of this sits right with James.

He’s going to stop it. I just know he will.

The question is how.

“Let me make this blatantly clear.” He’s back to leaning in his seat. My eyes are drawn to the scissors in his hand. To the dark look in his eyes. “I. Own. You.”

The scissors go to the crotch of my pajama pants. My breath hitches as I watch James pull at the waistline, creating space between my body and my pants, and—

“Oh my God.” Having a man tear your pants down the middle is erotic. This is seduction. “Oh. I didn’t notice that I don’t have any panties on.”

“Be a good girl. My good girl.” The dull edge of the blade is cold on my pussy. It’s dangerous. Hot. So fucking hot. He brushes it over my lips, down to my entrance. “Stay still.”

I shriek, grabbing James’s shoulders so I wouldn’t grind my hips into it. I’m being his good girl. His property.

“Take my cock out. Let me see how well my little pet can ride me.”

He discards the scissors somewhere in the room. The faint clink against wood hardly registers. My hands are on the button of his jeans. On the zipper.

“That’s it.” He’s so thick that it’s an effort to drag the zipper down. His hand on the side of my neck encourages me, squeezing it. “You know what? I’ve changed my mind. You do deserve a reward.”

My heart lights up. I’m growing increasingly dependent on his approval. Any kind of approval. I’m losing myself. I’m finding myself in his dark eyes.

I’m terrified of these thoughts swarming inside my head.

Of the look he’s leveling me with. Cold and hot. Ice and fire. War wages within him. He’s just as conflicted, just as desperate as I am.

He might never show it.

But he is.

“Please.” I palm his length over his boxers. He hisses. Curses. *Fuck*. “I’ve been so good. So good for you.”

“So why aren’t you riding my cock already?” The pressure on my neck is dangerous. He throbs in my palm.

I can’t take him out fast enough. While I do, he says, “Our families and the firm have a week off work. Everyone’s on vacation.”

“Not you.” He needs to attend to business here. Has to take care of me.

This murderer.

He threatened to kill me.

I’m pretty sure he’ll never call me *honey* or buy me flowers.

He’s giving me everything I could ever dream of, regardless.

What he’s doing for me, for the other women, is nothing short of chivalry. He’s the anti-hero I’ve been searching for my entire life.

When life gets dark, I’ll have him at my side. Darker. Fiercer. Fucking insane.

Mine. I’ll make him mine.

I rise on my knees, leaning forward. It’s so decadent, how he helps me sink onto his length.

I’m groaning, clinging onto his shoulders, hardly able to breathe. Desire makes my legs shake. His glare has goosebumps prickling my skin.

“Fuck. Fuck. You’re tight. So wet for me.” His free hand clutches my hip possessively. “You’re such a whore for humiliation. For me.” He shoves me deeper down his cock. “I’m the one stretching you. Your sweet cunt. It’s mine. Like the rest of you. No one else can ever have this. Not even Topher.”

He thickens inside me. Pushes his fingers in my mouth, dragging them in and out on my tongue, railing me with his cock.

“He couldn’t have had you. Even when you were together.” He pulls his fingers out, placing his hand beneath my mouth. “Spit.”

I do as he says.

“Good girl. My Ophelia.”

“Yours, yours, yours,” I chant as he presses his wet fingers to my clit and rubs. My fingernails dig into his shoulders, almost ripping holes into his T-shirt. “No one but you. Always. *Fuck*. Yours.”

“Eyes on me.”

I didn’t realize that I tipped my head up, fighting to survive this onslaught of pleasure and James’s intensity. I look at him, falling deeper and deeper in love with this man.

“You’ll still be mine by the end of the week.” His face is pure determination. Pure rage. “Always. Say it.”

“Always.”

He takes me. He fucks me. Wrings one orgasm after another out of me.

James groans his release, and this time, I don’t pass out. I hug him, clinging to him, never letting go.

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24

JAMES

Time flies. I always considered it such a fucking cliché. A thing people say.

Every second of my life has been long and accounted for. Whether I spent them suffering, scheming, or being the best at what I do.

The hours have constantly crawled by.

During the time Topher was growing in his mother's womb, it'd been agony. The last month was the worst. I couldn't leave the house in case she went into labor. In case my father got in a particularly sadistic mood and decided to pull the trigger on her himself.

In those days, I hadn't been half the man I am today. My dad had me under his thumb. I'd been subjected to his psychological and physical abuse for years.

Anyway. That was then. This is now.

I'm here, in the kitchen, leaning against the granite island and staring out at nothing in particular.

And wondering, because I'm fucking clueless, as to how this week has gone by so fast.

I loathe this dark blue suit I'm wearing. It means I have to return to the routine I'm no longer interested in.

For the first time since I can remember, I wish I could stay at home rather than head out to the office.

Trials, contracts, negotiations, and threats, none of these appeal to me.

What gets my cock hard and my blood pumping is nothing and no one but Ophelia. This creature. This siren who's shared my bed over the last few nights. Who's wet for me when I fuck her in her sleep. Who latches onto my silence.

Who's obsessed with violent sex. Who submits to me, doing everything I order her to. Like walking naked around the house just because. She opens her mouth to take my cock or tell me about herself when I tell her to.

She makes me hug her. Makes me *want* to hug her.

Read next to her. Rest next to her.

Chaos. Mess.

We don't make sense.

Except we do.

She's strange. An enigma.

And she'll be here while I'm in the office. Alone for another week without the staff.

I ordered them to extend their time at the hotel. I trust them to keep a secret, to take extra care when it comes to her.

That's not it.

I'm the problem. I'm nowhere near done playing with my new toy.

I was delusional, thinking I could get rid of her. That all I wanted to do was fuck a baby into her.

She's mine. Plain and simple.

"Good morning." Her voice is as soft as her footfalls. "You're up early."

"Always am."

The dusk's orange light bleeds into the room. Any day now, it'll start snowing. Orange will be traded for white light. The snow will reflect the sun, blending into the gray.

A few feet separate us. Six. Three. She stops there, her bedridden hair loose around her shoulders. Her small body hidden under one of my white T-shirts.

She can come closer. I'm aching for her to touch me.

But I can tell she's scared. Scared and turned on. I see it in her questioning eyes. Hear it in her shallow breaths.

Ophelia scrunches the hem of her T-shirt. "What's wrong?"

She ignores or doesn't notice the device in my hand.

Or maybe she does notice it. Maybe that's why she stays at a safe distance.

“What’s wrong is you’re not naked, Ophelia.” I’m a monster. I’m turning everything into a game. I’m hurting her. Pain flashes over her eyes. She blinks it away. “What’s wrong is you’re being my filthy fucking property. Standing there, instead of spreading your legs. Instead of offering me your pretty cunt, like the whore you are.”

She gulps. Her nipples are taut. “You want me that bad?”

Every minute of every day. Being hard for so long is torture.

I say nothing.

“So. What was going through your head when you looked out there?” Another hesitant step toward me. She’s being a brat. Defying me. Taunting me. Prying into my soul. “Tell me.”

Her scent carries over to me. It’s sex. My shampoo. *Her*.

Fuck.

Throughout the week, I haven’t shared many more of my secrets with her. Other than a few words yesterday, I’ve offered her nothing, really, in terms of stories. A sick part of me still needs to test her.

Then dominate every aspect of her life.

She has been good, though. I owe her something.

“When I was young, I hated watching the seasons change.” My hand fits around her nape and I haul her to me. Kiss her sweet mouth that tastes of mint. Lick her tongue that tastes like mine. “They taunted me. My father upped his torture the older I got. And though I aged, it felt like I was never old enough to leave him. Turning eighteen got me out of that house, but I still had to wait until I was twenty-one. Each season meant nothing but darkness. I could never see the light. Eventually, I stopped caring for it.”

“Oh.” Her palm slips to my freshly shaved cheek. Her fingers trace the line of my cheekbone. The only warmth I’ve ever known, and it’s my captive offering it to me. “We haven’t talked like that in days.”

We’re both quiet. We’re in this together. I’m a part of something.

Us.

There’s an *us*, and fuck, I can’t be tempted. Can’t get swallowed up in it. A drowning man isn’t good enough for her.

I raise the hand that’s holding a metal cuff at the end of a long chain. The other metal cuff is already locked around a bar under the kitchen island.

“Hands and knees.”

Her expression morphs from warmth to curiosity, then into determination. “Stay home and I will.”

“No.” I leave out the part that it’s a risk not showing up to work. The burden of worrying is mine to carry. “On your hands and knees.”

Her scowl is adorable.

“Maybe.” Her eyes light up when I start negotiating with her. Poor thing, she still has no idea who she’s dealing with. “If you beg me just the right way, I won’t work long hours today.”

“Long hours? You’d do that? Are you kidding me right now?” Her fists are in the air. Her cheeks are flushed. Now she’s turned on. Now she’s furious. Now we’re playing my game. “It’s bad enough that you plan on leaving me here chained and alone. Now you’re telling me that you plan to be back at what? Midnight? You monster.”

“Owner.” My grip around her nape becomes a punishing squeeze. She whimpers, and I hold her right. Fucking. There. “Not a monster. Owner. A merciful one.”

I lick the corner of her mouth. Feisty thing she is, she twists her head to bite my lips. The only reason I avoid her is so that I’m not bleeding before work.

Otherwise, I would’ve let her.

Otherwise, I would’ve taken great pleasure in punishing her for it.

“As proof of just how merciful I am.” Her body moves in the direction that mine demands of her. I pin her back to the island, dropping the chain and cuff on the countertop. “You’ll get to orgasm before I leave.”

“I can come after you leave.” Her fingers grab onto my waist, nails digging into me. “You’ll be at the office, and I’ll be here. Fantasizing about Topher. I’ll imagine it’s him on top of me. Call him my owner. I’ll come, screaming his—”

There’s not a decent bone left in my body when she talks like that. Taunting me. Forcing jealousy into me, poisoning me with it.

Choking me with it.

She won’t get to finish this abominable sentence.

I pull out the butt plug from my jacket pocket. I meant to stretch her, play with her later.

It was supposed to be a gift.

She’ll be having it as a punishment instead.

The crystal at the end reflects the orange light hues that filter into the kitchen, grabbing her attention.

I'd revel in her fear, except my mind goes blank as jealousy blocks out everything else.

Everything other than her punishment.

I shove the butt plug into her insolent mouth.

"—name! Topher!" she mumbles around it. Screams. As much as possible, when I have it secured between her teeth. With my hand covering her jaw, I shut her up. "Mmm! Mmm!"

"I'm assuming it's *monster* you're trying to say." A minute or so pass. I drag the butt plug in and out in small motions. Nothing about what I feel is small. Fire burns in the pit of my stomach. Adrenaline soaks my veins. "Wrong word. Wrong goddamn wrong. As wrong as it was to mention another man's name."

Her mouth is silenced. Her fists are her last weapon against me. She uses them. Punches my chest. Reaches for my neck. I'm heavier than her. More resilient.

My jealousy and rage turn me a million times stronger than I was seconds ago. Never mind that I was stronger than her to begin with.

"Are you going to do as you're told? Will you beg?"

Spit dribbles down her chin. I lean in to lick it, pushing the butt plug in deeper. The end almost disappears in her mouth. She screams louder, eyes wider. I scare her.

"Be a good slut and beg me to come home early. Apologize for saying another man's name. *His* name."

She pinches her lips. Throws her fists at me one last time.

There they are. The tears of humiliation. Her body's way of telling me how much she gets off on this.

"You hate this, don't you?"

She nods, pressing her fists to my chest. Pushing me away. Pleading with me to stay.

I'm still fucking her mouth as I slide a hand down her body. Two fingers go into her heat, making her thighs clench.

"Ah. No panties. And soaked. Yes, Ophelia." Her pussy contracts around me. Squeezing me as I pump two fingers into her. "Oh, you hate this. You hate me. Hate being humiliated."

Her "No" is murmured. Her hips thrust into me.

Her arousal runs down my hand.

I pull my fingers and the butt plug out. "Hands and knees."

“Asshole owner.” Ophelia’s fight shouldn’t turn me on as much as it does.

“Lose the shirt.”

It’s sexy as hell to watch her whip it off her body. To see her kneeling before me, her fingers pointing at my shoes. All the while, her face is an image of indignation.

“Who will you be thinking about when I’m gone today?” I twirl the plug in my hand. Swipe my tongue on it, tasting her spit. Marveling at how her cheeks flush.

Her chin dips. The submissive gesture doesn’t fool me. She looks at me beneath her thick lashes, fuming. “You.”

“The truth now.” I lean so that my forearm perches on the island. When I nudge her chin with the tip of my shoe, she growls at me. “Me or Topher?”

Of course I know the answer.

It’s my name she whispers in my bed. In her sleep.

It’s me she gives her body to over and over.

But making her admit it while she’s on the floor embarrasses her.

Embarrassment makes her wet.

“You.”

“Hmm.” Pretending to be bored when my dick throbs in my pants is a hardship. “I’m not sure that I believe you. Prove it to me. Beg.”

“Please.” Ophelia takes initiative, this gorgeous, feral creature. Curls her fingers around the side of my dress shoe. Keeps gazing at me as she raises it to her mouth and kisses the tip. Her eyes are still very much furious. “Owner. Come home early. Please. Oh. And I’m so sorry for saying Topher’s name. Please forgive me. Please.”

Fuck. Me.

All it took was being her monster. All it took was showing her, in my fucked-up way, that I—

No. Yes, I—

Damn it all to hell.

I care. That’s it.

I. Care.

“Good girl.” To save myself from losing my goddamn mind, I wrench my foot from her hold, putting it back on the floor. “Say *I’m begging you*. Say *please* again.”

“I’m begging you.” Her fingers scratch the wood floor. Mouth parting as she pants, unable to hide how turned on she is. “Please.”

“So needy. Willing to do anything for me.” Holding the chain and cuffs attached to it, I move to kneel behind her. “Good girl. You’ll get what you asked for.”

Without a single warning, I snap the cuff around her ankle. Then I shove the heap of metal next to the bar under the kitchen island.

She looks over her shoulder. Pushes her butt toward me. “Are you going to spank me?”

“Such a whore for pain.”

My hand cracks on her ass. The welts have healed since I belted her. She still screams, still moans. Getting me even harder for her. My lust is suffocating.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

I push the butt plug into her pussy.

“Look at you. You’re dripping. Soaked. Sucking the butt plug in.” At her whimper, my cock jerks. “It’s a good thing.”

I take it out, applying her wetness around the rim. A groan escapes me as she clenches her thighs, as she whimpers, everything about her rejecting the stretch, the pain.

As if anything can help her against me. God himself could come down here, and I’d defile her in His presence.

She’s not His.

Mine.

“I’m scared.” She sways forward, moving her ass away from me.

“Poor girl.” I pull her to me by her hip. “You must be under the impression that I care.”

Of course I care. Precum dampens my boxers. My heart knocks against my ribs.

I’m on my knees for her.

If that’s not caring, I don’t know what is.

“I—”

“Deep breath.” *Crack!* My hand lands on her ass. I spit on her tight hole. “Relax.”

“James.” My name is a plea on her lips. To keep going, most likely, since her ass unclenches. Since she relaxes like I told her to. “Don’t hurt me.”

“I won’t give you anything you can’t handle.” I’ll eviscerate anyone who dares to harm her. “It’s going to hurt. And you will moan for me. You will like this.”

I slip my arm around her waist, pressing my fingers to her clit. My spit and her arousal soak my jacket. My sleeve is ruined.

I’ll have to change out of my suit before going to work.

And?

“That’s my good girl.” Each stroke of my fingers relaxes her further. I pull back to slip the tip of the plug into her ass. Her strangled cry is hot. It’s my undoing. “My filthy girl, doing as she’s told. My fucking girl.”

When her cries turn to moans, I’m done waiting. I straighten, twist the plug one, two, three times, and it goes in her ass.

Ophelia howls, staring at the ceiling, and fuck, if this isn’t the most tempting sound I’ve ever heard. The plug in her ass is so beautiful that I can’t look away.

“Take it out,” she breathes. Her ass squeezes hard around it. Her eyes beg me to leave it there. Right fucking there. “Please, take it out.”

“Stay.” My hand running along the curve of her back is a threat. Ophelia knows me enough to realize I’m not offering comfort. She curses under her breath. Holds still, though a slight tremor courses through her. “You have two options. One, you can keep clenching your ass. It won’t stop my cock from stuffing your pussy, Sonnet. It might even feel better that way. For me. I mean, all that pressure…”

“Asshole,” she whispers.

I pull my cock out of my pants, out of my boxers, slapping the end of the butt plug with it. “What was that?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Her apology is quick. Her shoulders rise and fall with each of her labored breaths. She must think that I plan on shoving my dick in there with the plug. With how irrationally scared she is, it might be a possibility. I’m a sick fuck, not bothering to correct her. “Option two?”

“Do as I say and relax.” I line my cock up to her dripping pussy. “Makes no difference to me. I’m fucking your cunt, pain or no pain.”

“Assho—Owner,” she rushes to correct herself. She’s beautiful in this light as the sunrise caresses her face. As fear and anger wash over her features.

Beautiful and dirty.

“Careful there.”

Both my hands are on her hips. I ignore the cursed tattoo on my hand. I can't hate it as much since it brought me to her.

"You're cruel." Her eyes are narrowed. As close to pitch black as possible.

She wants this so bad.

Not half as much as I want her. My mark on her back only serves to intensify this storm raging inside me. This feral need to mark her from the inside. To tear the bandage and come all over her still healing wound.

It'll have to wait until she's healed.

I need her cunt wrapped around me. I need inside her like I need my next breath. No more waiting. No more warning.

I shove inside, all the way in.

"Fuck," she screams, bowing her head. "Fuck."

"That's right. I'm fucking you." My voice is strained, my lust pouring out of my throat. "So tight," I grunt behind clenched teeth. Spank her over and over for being this tempting. For ruining my plans. For making me *feel*. This isn't a punishment for talking back. This goes far deeper than that. "Taking every inch of me."

Her cries and screams reach my cock. My heart. With each thrust, I grow more attached to her. Lose my fucking mind to her. It'll be a nightmare to focus at work today.

It's the only way to save her.

"You're mine." *Shove*. *Thrust*. *Spank*. "You'll come on my cock. Even if you hate me. Even if you hate yourself for wanting me. You'll fucking come, Ophelia. Because you belong to me. My good girl. You feel dirty for how wet you are for this. But that's exactly how I like you." I drag my dick out, slamming back into her. Holding her in place when I knock the breath out of her. "Dirty and degraded and mine."

Her body was made for seduction. The voices coming out of her bring me closer and closer to an orgasm. What really does it for me, though—what has my balls tightening and my seed spilling into her—is her. Her orgasm. Her *oh my God* and *fuck, I hate you* while she comes all over my cock.

Yeah, she hates me. Despises me.

She's stuck with me.

I'm the only one for her. Same as she is for me.

"Good girl." I bend to kiss her shoulder. Her neck.

She glares at me, her lips twisting. “I don’t hate you.”

“I know.” Her body rocks with each slow stroke. As I pour more of my cum into her. “I don’t hate you, either.”

When I’m done, I tuck myself in, remove the butt plug and help her to her back. She’s sprawled on the floor, hooded eyes staring up at me. Her cheeks are tear-streaked, her hands outstretched.

Toward me.

As I bend in to kiss her—to murmur against her lips that she’s such a good girl—I finally see us for what we are.

She’s put her life in my hands. In the hands of a dark and twisted man. One whose sense of right and wrong has been distorted for far too long. A man who’ll cherish her, in his own way.

And I’m the one who’ll give her what she’s asking for.

“Be right back.” Her face is a picture of trust and calm as I stride to the sink.

A clean cloth waits for me there, which I soak in warm water from the tap. I return to her, trailing it along her flesh, wiping her thighs and pussy clean.

“Perfect.” I place a kiss on her swollen clit, and she yelps, then releases a relieved sigh. She lets me dress her in her shirt. I help her to her feet and cup her cheeks. “Have a good day, Sonnet. Don’t have too much fun without me.”

Her eyebrows lower. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“Yes, of course.” Pretending to be polite messes with her head. I can tell. I get off on that. “I gave the staff another week off. You’ll have the house all to yourself until I’m back.”

“Ha-ha, very funny.” Creases line her smooth brow. Eyes darting to the floor, then me. “Release me. I’m not some animal. This isn’t right.”

“And return to an empty house?” I sound genuinely concerned. I sound like a fucker. “I don’t think so.”

“This house is impenetrable.” Her voice rises. There they are—the fists at my chest. Small, adorable blows. “I can’t get out.”

“That’s true. But I’ll be really fucking hard knowing you’re shackled. Waiting for me.” I let my knuckles trail the delicate line of her jaw. “You’re here to please me, Ophelia. This pleases me.”

“You’re serious.” She stops punching me, her eyes searching mine. “You’re fucking serious. Are you still upset that I’m messing with your

head? I thought we were over it."

"You're perfect." Stepping away from her hurts worse than any of her blows. "That's why you're here and not in the cell. The chain is long enough to reach the guest bathroom and the living room. I left the heater on, but if you're cold, you have throw blankets, sweatpants with a zipper on the leg, and a sweater on the couch."

"Come back! James!" she screams to my back. "You can't do this to me!"

I turn in the archway between the kitchen and living room. "You did so well with the butt plug. You ended up enjoying it. You'll enjoy this too. Because I asked you to."

"You never asked me to," she spits after I start crossing the hallway toward the stairs.

Something hard hits my leg. I twist to stare down at the butt plug I placed on the counter. I smirk at it, then at her.

"I'll be home before you know it, darling."

Her hands are on her waist. Head shaking in disbelief. Soon she'll understand. Soon, she'll like it.

"Early, just like I promised you."

"I hate you."

Strange thoughts fill my head as I look at her.

My heart cracks in my chest for needing you so badly. My bones sing your name. Being away from you will be absolute agony. I can't wait to be home and find you here, chained and waiting for me.

What's come over me?

No idea.

Better not dwell on it before work. Before a day of having to fake not having a captive woman waiting for me at home.

"You'll get over it."

Ophelia's accusations continue. My feelings for her burn a hole in my chest.

I go back to my room to change into a clean suit and leave for the office, anyway.

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25

JAMES

"Mr. Hawthorne, there's someone here for you," Andrea, my assistant, says over the line.

A frown tugs at my lips. My body goes on high alert. I don't remember having a four o'clock meeting.

Besides, Andrea never says *someone* is here. She always takes names.

Could it be Ophelia? Could she have broken free somehow and stormed into my office? Did she stride past the other offices, reaching my corner one, demanding to be let inside?

I imagine her out there. Next to Andrea's desk, wearing whatever clothes she chose from her closet. Furious. Gorgeous.

She could've missed me.

Motherfucker.

I've missed her too.

And I'm scared out of my mind.

Topher could see her. He and Camden have been tagging along with our associates when their academic schedule allows it. Both of them are here today, spending the afternoon in one of the cubicles. Learning and watching.

He'd kill her in a heartbeat.

Ophelia. Ophelia. Ophelia.

The need to protect her is a vise around my throat. It's fire singeing my blood.

I've protected other women before.

Never felt this way about it. This invested. This out of my mind with concern for their well-being.

If my son doesn't kill Ophelia, Oliver will. He's been strolling outside my office the entire day, even though we've had back-to-back meetings since this morning. He hasn't been subtle about stalking me.

I'm out of my chair, crossing the sitting area next to the floor-to-ceiling windows.

My heart is in my throat.

I swing the door open.

I step back, preparing myself to yell at Ophelia. To haul her inside. Put my goddamn body between her and the world.

I'll die if that means saving her. I absolutely will.

"James, so nice to see you."

It takes a long moment for my eyes to focus. To register who's standing in the doorway of my office.

Short blond hair. Demonic blue eyes.

Young and reckless in a dark, expensive suit.

Parker Langley.

I hide my relief well. My sigh remains locked in my throat; my face is a mask of indifference.

"I hoped to surprise you." He grins wide, the idiot. "Andrea here was kind enough to indulge me."

Juvenile. So fucking juvenile.

We shake hands while I swallow my contempt.

"Mr. Langley." He may not be formal when addressing me. Oliver may be on a first-name basis with him and his father.

I insist that we maintain the status quo. This is a place of business. These people aren't my friends. I don't have friends.

If I did, they sure as shit wouldn't be rapists and murderers.

Handshakes out of the way, I twist to allow him entrance. "Let's talk inside."

No blood splatter taints his clothes or his face. His eyes aren't haunted as most guilty people's are. Doesn't mean he didn't just drive down here straight from a crime scene. It would suit him.

I'm behind my desk, silent, not offering him a seat or a drink. "To what do I owe this visit?"

My pulse, it's not slowing.

Ophelia’s to blame.

Worrying over her. Wanting her throughout the entire fucking day.

The desire to claim and own and destroy her is stronger than ever.

I need her shackled. Crawling. Begging.

To shove myself into her dripping cunt. Lose myself in her furious eyes.

No. What I need is a moment to collect myself. A second to come to terms with this new realization.

I’m past wanting her. Past obsessing over her.

This is worse than any other addiction known to humankind.

Deep breath.

“I could, hypothetically, possibly, need your services in the near future.” Parker strolls straight toward the wet bar, pouring himself whiskey. Drops one ice cube in, making the liquid slosh. “The very near future.”

The door to my office flings open. I no longer expect Ophelia to show up unannounced. My brain is functioning. Cold and calculating. She can’t get out of my home. That’s impossible.

“Parker.” Oliver lets out a hearty laugh. He’s tanned from his trip—where did he say he traveled other than Amsterdam? Never mind, I don’t care—looking far less suspicious than he had throughout the day. An act for our client. “My assistant informed me that you were here. Great seeing you, friend.”

Again with this friend thing. What a joke.

This kinship makes my skin crawl, but it’s necessary. Other than our reputation of getting over ninety percent acquittal rate, that’s how we keep our clients ours.

Parker takes a sip of his drink, his attention on Oliver. “Same here. You look great. Safe to say you enjoyed your vacation?”

“Camden and I did, yes.” The door closes behind him. Andrea. “It was long overdue, our father and son bonding. Your dad was right to sit on my case all these years.”

“I believe you. Dad loves traveling together.” Parker’s laugh is condescending.

I focus on that instead of letting my mind wander to the shackled woman I have to protect.

Both men continue their mindless small talk as they lower themselves to the chairs across from me. I mirror their position, opening the button of my suit jacket.

“You said you needed our help.”

They stare at me, shocked that I put such an abrupt end to their conversation.

Being away from Ophelia for hours does that to me.

My self-restraint has been stretched so thin it’s about to snap.

It’s been like this ever since I left home. It got worse when Topher offered to go out to dinner with me earlier today. He wanted to discuss this *thing we talked about*.

I declined, but it’s never stopped bothering me.

“I said I might.” Parker places his empty tumbler on my desk. The ice cube is gone. Melted. Unlike Parker’s confidence. His devious grin. “I covered my—”

I raise a hand to stop him, at the same time Oliver says, “Hold it right there.”

We can’t be accomplices to a felony. Which, obviously, there was. No number of connections and threats would save us from being disbarred. This is bigger than any of us.

“All right, all right.” He chuckles, the prick, leaning back.

One foot over his knee shows just how at ease he is. How he’s grown with the knowledge that Daddy’s money will save him from anything. Same as the men in our families.

Not Ophelia.

Brave, resilient, strong Ophelia.

Perfect Ophelia.

On her knees.

Or here at my side. As my partner.

Maybe both.

Shut up.

“Came here to give you guys a heads-up, that’s all.”

Oliver chuckles, shaking his head. “Kids these days.”

Kids. He’s twenty-fucking-five.

A murdering twenty-five year old.

Yes, I might be the devil for defending demons like Parker. Never said I was a saint.

I might not even be a lawyer by the time the dust settles.

And what exactly are you planning to be?

The question is as disturbing as it’s redundant.

At the present moment, Parker is my client. I have to do what I can to defend him. I'm ticking items off the list of shit I have to do to prepare my line of defense for this motherfucker.

Shit will hit the fan soon, by the smug look on his face.

It might even happen before I go through with the plan of bringing down the other man sitting across from me.

But not before I get to go home, to Ophelia.

Our games aren't over.

They never will be.

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26

OPHELIA

How dare he.

How.

Dare.

He.

I slam a drawer in the guest bathroom's vanity for what seems like the millionth time today.

"Nothing. Nothing useful in any of these fucking rooms," I scream into the void. Into the empty house. I always thought that high ceilings were gorgeous. Not anymore. Not when my despair bounces off them. "Nothing!"

Clean, plush towels are neatly stacked on the shelves attached to the wall. There are shampoos, conditioners, and soaps for both men and women in the fancy shower. First-aid kit, ointments, and creams are in the drawer I just closed.

No bobby pins. No pins at all.

Same goes for the kitchen. For the end tables and vases around the living room. Everything is so freaking clean. So spotless.

Back when Sage and I were roommates, a bobby pin would magically appear anywhere around our apartment. She even used it as a bookmark once.

Here, there are none.

James lives alone, and, surprise, surprise, he doesn't use bobby pins. It's as if he doesn't live here at all.

There are no pens scattered around the place. Nothing I can break and turn into a makeshift key.

“Wait…” Over the hours I’ve been alone in here, I’ve become way too comfortable talking to myself.

Which doesn’t matter. I have an idea where to look, at last.

The staff might have dropped something valuable around here. The men keep their hair short, but there are plenty of women.

Yes, they haven’t been here in over a week. Also, yes, they live in the staff quarters, outside of the mansion.

The chances one of them lost or left a bobby pin lying around here are slim to none.

“Argh!” Another scream at the mirror. At myself for being stupid and trusting him.

He promised I’d enjoy it.

There’s nothing enjoyable about losing my mind. About this loneliness. This frustration.

My reflection mocks me, telling me what a liar I am.

I am enjoying this.

I’m enjoying my stay here, period.

I don’t have black circles under my eyes. I look healthy. Rejuvenated. Slightly unhinged with my eyebrows knitted and my lips pinched, but I look good.

I’m the most refreshed that I’ve felt in years.

And I love being surrounded by him, even when he’s not here. Even when he fucking shackled me.

The shirt I’m wearing—I raise the collar to my nose, moaning at the delicious scent of his cologne. It’s a reminder of his harsh touch. Of his arms around me.

I close my eyes and imagine the mark he branded on my back. The barbaric, wonderful mark has been healing nicely beneath the bandages that he changes twice a day.

Just the thought of it has my lips curving up.

“No,” I scold myself. “Wipe that smile off your face. He betrayed you. You share his bed. He shouldn’t have chained you.”

The me in the mirror nods.

Hmm.

I wonder how much of my sanity I've lost here. If I'm ever going to get it back.

Strangely, the idea doesn't bother me as much as it ought to. Being possessed and owned by a man who sings to my soul isn't terrifying. It isn't awful.

He's my everything.

Dark and mysterious. Someone who's willing to burn the world for me. Do the craziest things just so I can be his.

He paid thirty million dollars to have me here.

He can be controlling, cruel, and detached. He can pretend he doesn't mind disposing of me as if I were a chair or an old shirt.

Doesn't change the fact that he's mine. That I'm his.

That he's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

Not because of the branding, the cell, this goddamn chain. Not because of the power that reverberates from him like nothing and no one else I've ever met.

Because of him.

Half-defeated, half-madly in love, I stroll back to the living room. The chain drags behind me, clattering on the floor with my every step.

My eyes roam around the house as I remember the things I like—no, *love*—about James. His hugs late at night. His lips on my forehead. His scruff grazing my skin. His groans and my name on his lips when he comes.

He calls me property, pet, Sonnet, and Ophelia. Slut and whore and *mine*.

His eyes light up differently throughout the hours of the day. Depending on his mood. On how conflicted he is by me. By what I do to his heart.

Every time I look at him, I peel off another layer of this multifaceted man.

My sigh is loud in the otherwise quiet house.

James puts so much work into pretending he's a bad man. In a way, he is.

He can lock his emotions down faster than I can snap my fingers sometimes. Murderers, rapists, filthy fucking human beings—he defends them for a living.

And yet.

He's not the awful man he makes himself out to be.

I'm the living proof. The other girls are too.

I reach the end of the living room, about to take a step into the hallway that leads to the rest of the mansion, and—

I'm stopped.

"Motherfucker." The metal cuff digs into my skin, reminding me why I have every right to be mad at James.

Leaving me here is one thing. I understand that he has to go to work to maintain appearances. I haven't forgotten that he has three other people ruling this rotten empire alongside him. He explained it to me last night in bed.

"They're obligated to kill me if I step out of line." His fingers brushed my cheek. The fingers on his inked hand. The one that spanked me into an orgasm a few minutes ago. "I'm allowed to end their lives as well. For any sign of treason. Our families have allowed many transgressions. Betrayal isn't one of them."

"Was anyone actually murdered?" I shivered. We lay under the sheets, naked, but it wasn't cold. I could never be cold when I was cocooned against his body. "Other than your father and Oliver's?"

Rain pattered on the window of our bedroom.

"No." His hand slid down my cheek, cupping it.

"You could be the third one." My shivers intensified. A life without James wasn't a life I wanted to live.

"No." James flipped me so I had my back to him and pressed me to his chest. His hand splayed over my stomach, fingers digging into my skin, answering me with his body as well as his mouth. "No one will kill me. I'm putting an end to this."

I heard every word he wasn't saying. That he would end anyone he perceived as a threat.

"Topher could kill you." The underlying meaning of my words was that he wouldn't kill his own son.

Did I want him to do it? I didn't think so. Topher had been a jerk. I'd come across plenty of jerks in my life that I had no urge to kill.

But if it came down to Topher or me…

I had to know.

"Ophelia." James gripped my chin, twisting me to him. His icy-blue eyes clashed into mine, flashing in the dark. "No one will hurt you. You're mine. No matter what happens, I'll protect you."

That was all he said to me.

That was also the most emotion I've ever seen in that man. It was a beautiful thing. I woke up floating.

"Then you had to come and ruin everything." I kick my shackled foot in the air. The chain rises from the floor. Drops.

I'm being dramatic. I'm lying.

Because I don't really hate this game.

I don't hate being owned by him.

The sun begins to set in the sky. The day isn't over yet. I can still learn more about him.

How?

Look. I have to look elsewhere. There has to be a bobby pin here somewhere. I remember seeing them in Maisie's, Clara's, and Poppy's hair that day of the auction.

I drop to my hands and knees and crawl around the living room. If James has cameras in here, I bet he's having a field day.

The thought makes me stop. I rise to my knees, kissing my middle finger before flipping him off.

That is, if there are cameras at all. If, instead of working, he's stalking me.

Heat rushes through my body. My cheeks are on fire. My pussy and ass are bare.

He could be looking at me while he's in the office. Fuck, that's filthy.

Okay. Stop. Back to searching.

No luck finding anything on the carpet. Same when I peek beneath the coffee table. End tables. First armchair. Second armchair.

The last place I try is one of the couches.

Bingo.

I blink a couple of times at the sight of the black bobby pin lying beneath it.

Waiting for me to come get it.

A sense of victory washes over me. I couldn't care less about breaking free.

It's the winning that matters. That's how I'll impress him.

By unlocking the cuff before he gets here. Before he has a chance to stop me.

Even if he's watching, it's a long drive from the city back here.

I have at least an hour to bathe in my victory and collect information by snooping around here.

Twisting the bobby pin is the easy part. Fitting into the lock is where it gets tricky. One of the kids in my last foster home taught me how to do that. He had awful foster parents years before we met. They'd lock him up. He had to find ways to break free.

And I was lucky enough to meet him.

Click, *click*, *click*. My tongue darts out, caught between my teeth. It helps me focus on my task. I swear it does.

The feel of the lock giving in has my pulse spiking. James could punish me for this. He could bend me over and belt me again.

Is it sick that I wish he would?

It is.

Yet here I am, praying for the belt.

I don't care about anything now after that final *click*.

"Ha!" Another scream to the void. It's been a whole day of those.

First thing I do is rub my ankle. I'm fine; James wouldn't harm me, but after hours of being shackled by it and dragging the chain around, my poor ankle could definitely use some love.

Ten seconds of it. Then I'm up and out of the living room.

This sense of accomplishment, of victory, of imagining James's lips quirk up when he sees me like this…

That part gives me a rush that could only compare to actually being fucked by him.

The need to run around just to feel how free I am is intense.

So I do.

"Ahhhh!" My arms flail in the air as I run across the mansion, my feet hitting the floor. "Ahhhh!"

Screaming is so underrated. I'm going to make a habit out of it.

"Ahhhh!" The skies are dark, no light coming in from the windows. I must've been searching for the bobby pin longer than I thought.

That's fine. I'm free. Running with my head tipped to the high ceiling. Laughing like a crazy lady.

Thunder rolls somewhere in the distance.

I run and scream and run some more until I get there.

To the den.

I stop just outside of it, catching my breath.

Then I switch the lights on.

There it is. The desk he never lets me look at for too long. The man doesn't even sleep that much for me to sneak out of the bedroom to come down here and see what's in those folders.

Though there are far fewer of them out here than usual—two instead of a dozen—it's a start. A glimpse into this complex man's soul.

I wonder if it's got something to do with me. With us.

I hope so.

I'm quieter as I cross the room over to the desk.

What I'm doing is forbidden. I'm crossing a line.

Well, he kidnapped then bought me. I'd say he's been crossing plenty of lines first.

This isn't funny, Ophelia.

No, it isn't. I'm just growing a little untethered in this place. This prison. This gilded cage.

This home.

My fingers brush the tops of the folders, wondering which one I should try first.

The thickest folder is there, on the far left. It piques my interest, the size of it.

Deep breath.

I'm actually doing this. Fingers gripping the top of the folder, rubbing the rich paper.

I flip it open.

The photo at the top has me gasping. My hand flies to my mouth. I'm hot, then cold. Mostly flustered.

A young woman about my age straddles a man in his sixties. The locks of her wavy auburn hair have been brushed to the side so their profiles are visible. Her lips are pressed to his bald head. His are parted. Hands on her hips.

They're naked.

Caught in the act.

It looks incredibly intimate. Real. At least for the man.

Meaning, this isn't porn.

I wouldn't mind if James consumed it. Free country and all that.

But this stuff isn't porn.

Holy hell, there's more where that came from. Each photo has a name scrolled behind it. These are the secrets he talked about. The ones his father kept and now belong to him.

Wow.

A few of the faces here are recognizable. Some of them were at the auction. Others I've seen on the news.

I knew he was powerful. I had no idea it went this deep.

Ten. Twenty. Fifty photos. I become desensitized to compromised positions, eventually.

Then I close it.

For no apparent reason, my fingers shake as I open the second folder.

Oh, there is a reason. There are a bunch of them.

At the sight of the photo sitting on top, I stagger back.

My throat, I can't breathe. I put two hands on my chest, forcing my lungs to work.

Me. This is me. It's my picture on top.

Topher sits across the table from me in one of the restaurants we've been to. I'm wearing a black dress, and he's in a dark suit. My face is bare of emotions. His is empty as well.

Whoever took this photo, they captured it less than a month ago. When I was so over Topher, but insisted that maybe we could make it work.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the Hawthorne men had someone stalking us on our dates. Photos to prove to his cult that I'm…

What?

Worthy? Hot?

A good enough piece of flesh to offer to their buyers?

Blood rushes between my ears. My chest is tight.

This is what a heart attack must be like. Pressure and anger and shock.

My heart is literally beating me from the inside.

I hate Topher for this. Can't hate James for holding on to them.

The first man used me. The latter, he likes me. Has liked me for a while.

Fucking your forbidden, virgin cunt was all I could think about since the moment I saw you.

That's right. He said that.

Staring at the photo, I realize both things happened around the same time.

He met me for the first time a month before he kidnapped me.

Oh my God.

That happened just around the time this photo was taken.

That's actually comforting in a sick way.

My fingers are shaky as I lift the photo, placing it to the side. The second one is also recent. Not from one of my dates with Topher. Oh, no.

I'm in my bedroom. Alone. In a new black bra and panties set that I bought last month, since my last nice ones were old and had to be replaced.

Checking myself out in the mirror.

Me.

In my room.

Half-naked.

Their investigator invaded my privacy.

James has a hand in everything. He had to be the one to allow other people to stalk me. He gave them the go-ahead to look at me half-naked.

"Motherfuckers," I whisper as I flip through more photos of myself. At work. Jogging. In the subway. All of them from the past month. All of them scare and turn me on simultaneously. "Motherfuckers."

"*Fucker*." James. His low voice yanks me back into the room.

My head snaps up to him, eyes narrowing. "What did you just call me?"

"Not you. Never you." He's infuriatingly handsome, leaning against the doorway. His dark gaze is locked on mine, and I'm no longer indignant. I need him. I just need him. "You meant motherfucker. Singular, since I'm the one who took these photos. I'm the one who printed them here, in my home. I'm the only mother*fucker* who saw you compromised. Me. Only me."

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27

JAMES

Confessing this truth to Ophelia isn't a hardship.

That's what's gotten me *this*.

The blush creeping up her cheeks. Her jaw, slacking in semi-horror, semi-arousal.

I put those emotions there.

Having her here, like this, makes the blood pump harder throughout my body. I come alive at the sight of my prey, feral and horrified and beautiful.

I'm hard for her. Mesmerized.

Now.

That wasn't the case when I walked into the living room to find the ankle cuff picked. The chain on the rug.

Ophelia is gone.

That was my first and only thought for a couple of soul-crushing seconds.

Until I forced myself to do what I always do when the world stops making sense.

Think logically.

My phone didn't alert me to any of the doors opening while I'd been away. She couldn't have left.

But for some strange reason, my stomach remained in knots. The idea that she tried the doors—even if she failed—bothered me. More than bothered. It hurt.

That deep-seated ache translated into anger.

So. Much. Anger.

Temples throbbing. Teeth grinding. Vision blurring around the edges.

I never craved to own anyone's heart before. I don't care about anyone else's heart.

I cared about her, and then I came home to find that she had attempted to run away from me.

Infuriating. Unacceptable.

The dread in the pit of my stomach and the rejection, those were the worst.

They trumped over the pride I felt. She broke free from her shackles, and I admired her for it.

Too bad I couldn't get over of the fact that she didn't want me.

It was a weakness.

One that persisted until I reached my den.

Where Ophelia has been snooping.

She's here, going through my stuff.

So yes, she didn't try to leave.

My mind gets it.

My heart is having a hard time catching up.

Every bit of self-restraint I have left has been put to the test over the last few days. Every ounce of my self-control is hanging by a thread.

"You've been stalking me? You?" Her fingers press into the edge of the desk, knuckles turning white. "I—When? How? How come no one knew? My roommate? Neighbors? Topher?"

His name on her lips has my jaw clenching. I pull in a sharp breath. Rearrange my expression.

A predator never puts their emotions on display. It gives away their intentions.

"Simple. I didn't want them to." I push myself off the doorway. I'm a live wire beneath my harsh exterior and relaxed shoulders. I feel *everything*. I let none of it show. "I wasn't lying before. I've been obsessed with you. Irrationally. Illogically so. Stalking you went against everything I believed in, just like owning you. It was a risk. I did it anyway."

I took plenty of risks, not just one. Like driving from court to her apartment one afternoon. Like watching over her home after she returned from work or her dates with Topher.

“Only you?” she repeats what I told her. Her features harden the closer I get.

“Only me. And guess what? I’m not sorry that I stalked you.”

Her expression is shuttered. I can’t read her anymore. Maybe I’m too far, standing here, on the other side of the desk.

I have to be near her, to touch her.

I shrug off my jacket and place it over the chair behind me. Roll my sleeves up and get off on the way her eyes are drawn to the movement.

Ophelia turns around, her ass perched on my desk. She parts her legs. The tiniest shift of her body.

One she isn’t aware of.

I am. Prowling toward her, I tip her chin up and look her in the eye.

“You’re not?” Her energy wraps around me like a vise. A venomous snake. “Sorry?”

“Is that an apology you’re looking for?” Choking her would feel so good. Binding her so she’ll never leave me would be better. “You can forget about that.”

“From you?” Ophelia shakes her head, the brat. “I would never.”

Needing her like this is insufferable. I can’t hold back, and she can’t refuse me as I lean into her. As I slam both hands on my desk.

I trail my lips along the soft skin of her neck. Graze my teeth along the sensitive flesh, coaxing another wave of shivers out of her.

She fears me. Good. Fucking great.

Fear puts you on high alert. The threats are closing in on us.

The days of her being a victim are gone. I’ll protect her from the world, but I want her to take her place. And it isn’t behind me.

“Sonnet.” I grab her by the hip, thrusting her to my hard cock. Biting her hard enough to evoke a scream. Finally. It’s what I’ve been missing all day. How alive she is. “Are you disappointed?”

“Disappointed?” She clutches on to my shirt. “Why would I be?”

That Topher wasn’t the one stalking you.

Jealousy is a volatile and dangerous emotion. Especially when it’s out in the open.

Especially when I’m supposed to be teaching her to defend herself and making this a safe environment for her.

I let her see it anyway. Let her hear it in my voice. “That it’d been me stalking you. Me, not my son.”

She laughs, the sound as incredulous as it is sweet. It lights up her eyes. Clears some of the fear out of them.

I'm far less amused. "Do I look like I'm joking?"

"James, fuck. I shouldn't be telling you this."

"Wrong." I slide a hand to her back, brushing my fingers over her new, bandaged scar. "You should be telling me everything."

A few beats pass. Her lungs expand. Her blush deepens.

"You kidnapped me. Locked me in a cell." She licks her lips. "I shouldn't trust you. Shouldn't give you so much of myself. Most of all, I shouldn't tell you what I'm going to do after you fucking shackled me today."

"Ophelia." Being away from her for hours has done a number on me. The fact that she withholds things from me makes life far more unbearable. I manhandle her to lie on top of the desk, kick her legs apart, and lean into her. "Talk, or I'll make you talk."

"I'm relieved it's you." Her eyes have gone wild at my cruelty. Wilder than before. Her hands are hot and demanding on my neck. "You could've hired a private investigator to deliver the photos to you. You could've ordered Topher to do it. You didn't. It was you. You're really obsessed with me."

"And here I thought thirty million dollars should've made that clear enough." I roll my hips, feeling her bare pussy soaking the front of my pants.

"Money means shit to me." Her mouth. Her foul fucking mouth. I kiss it. Bite her lip until the taste of her blood soaks my tongue. "Fuck. Fuck money. It means absolutely nothing to me if I don't have your heart."

Now that my jealousy has been alleviated, I have a point to make. My cock to shove inside her. I need her body molded around mine.

Desperately.

While I remove my belt and pull out my cock, I tell her, "I don't have a heart."

We both groan when I'm all the way in her tight cunt. We both breathe hard. I want her breaths like I want every part of her.

As if she can hear me, she nods. "Take it."

"Like you ever had a choice."

My fingers are around her throat as I pummel into her. The world disappears, leaving me only her face and body, and fuck, that sweet cunt

squeezing me.

I'm overcome by the need for her.

A mistake.

While her dark eyes have consumed me, Ophelia has grabbed a pen. A makeshift weapon she pins to the side of my neck.

"You do have a heart, owner." The words are breathed between moans. I fuck her harder into the desk. Squeeze her throat a little tighter. Fuck, I'm hard for this. For her. "Tell me it's mine. A part of it. That I'm your property and"—*moan*—"yours. Just yours."

Telling her that she's the only person to make me feel anything remotely close to warmth is impossible.

I try anyway.

She deserves something because—

Because—

Damn it.

Because she's her. Because she's mine.

Oh, so very mine.

She's beautiful. Moaning and writhing beneath me. Freed from the ankle cuff, my clever little thing.

She's open and bare, her soul on display.

I owe her something.

"I was worried. Scared." My honesty tastes foul on my tongue. I slow my thrusts, but I don't back down. Bunching her shirt up to see her breasts, I sink deeper into her. Thicken inside her. "When I saw the cuff in the living room. When I didn't see you. You could've been out there." I emphasize the last word. Feel the pressure of the pen easing up on my neck. "Away from me, which was bad enough. But more than that."—*thrust*—"Hurt, Ophelia. They could've hurt you."

A few moments pass. Minutes where I rut into her, fuck my aggressions into her. Minutes that she stares up at me, tears glistening in her eyes.

"I can defend myself," she breathes out. Presses the pen harder into me to prove it, her eyes narrowing, then softening. She lets two tears slip. "But thank you."

"Sure you can." I rub her clit with my thumb. Stroke her. Pinch her.

She's done arguing, clenching so prettily around me. Her nipples are peaked and her tits bounce from the force of my thrusts.

I’m focused on pleasuring her. Addicted to watching her, then us, the spot where our bodies connect. Despite the pen. Despite the constant threat hanging over our heads.

“Look at you.” My eyes find hers. Lock on them. “Making a mess of my cock. Crying for me like I actually care. Like I’ll save you.”

I let go of her throat, flattening my hand on the desk. Just in time. A second before she comes all over me. The fresh wave of air heightens her climax, and she gasps, screaming my name, her pussy squeezing me.

“Break the skin,” I demand over her moans. Over my lust. Over the sounds of our bodies slapping together. She has to do it. Has to be violent and ready to fight, no matter what. “Break the fucking skin, Ophelia.”

Her lips part in shock. “Why?”

“Because I said so.” Because you have to be ready to kill. Soon.

My command is enough for her. While I thrust into her, I feel it. A tiny prickle. A sting that hardly registers.

Warm liquid drips down the collar of my shirt.

The pen drops to the desk.

The clattering sound is muted. Distant.

I’m so turned on that the world ceases to exist. I bring my throat to her mouth. Her lips brush over my wounded skin while I plow into her.

“Suck.” I’m leaving her no choice. I’m being rough. A bastard. She won’t regret hurting me. I won’t let her. “Suck. Now.”

“You’re insane.” Finally, her lips press. Her mouth sucks. Teeth latch on to me.

Ophelia makes a hungry, feral sound.

That’s my girl.

“Enough.” I straighten, towering over her.

My focus rests entirely on her. On how good it is to be wrapped up by her body. Be lost in her deep, dark eyes. Her plump, crimson-red lips. The tears that have almost dried. Her pussy that’s so goddamn sweet.

She’s a sonnet the universe wrote for me. A property I’m never selling.

I’m her owner. Her man. And I’m about to teach this beautiful innocent thing a lesson.

I move my hand from her clit up to one cheek, swiping her tears off it, and shove them in her mouth. Drag two fingers in and out of it as harshly as my cock pounds into her.

“I’m so proud of you.” I groan from having her clench around me. Her heels are pinned to my ass, as hard as her desperation for me. “For fighting me. For picking the ankle cuff.”

She moans and gags every time my fingers hit the back of her throat. Grabs the edge of the desk so she can lift her hips to mine.

“But you’ll need more than that to survive.” The pressure on my cock intensifies. She sucks my fingers harder. “God. *Fuck*. Your body, Ophelia. Jesus.”

I can’t get distracted. Have to finish this.

My hand is wet from her mouth when I reach for one of the pictures that I took of her. She’s in her underwear. Adorable and fucking oblivious. “You see this?”

“Yes.” Her eyes darken.

“This can’t happen again. You have to be vigilant. Ready to kill. At any fucking time. Do you understand me?”

“I’ll do anything you say,” she growls.

Her insanity speaks to my dick. To my cold heart and colder mind. The urge to come inside of her possesses me to the point I can’t see straight. I throw away the photo, pulling out of Ophelia.

“No,” she screams. “Don’t you dare leave me like this.”

“Don’t plan to.” I’m already manhandling her, flipping her and bending her over the desk. The first spank always makes her cry out the hardest. I have a hand in her hair, another on her hip.

“Fuck.” Back inside her pussy. Her warmth. Her body that’s so completely mine. I tug on her hair, pulling on the roots until she looks at me. “Who do you belong to?”

“Who do *you* belong to?”

I laugh. Shove her pretty face to the desk. “Brat. Talking back like that. Are you trying to get me riled up? Fuck you harder? Punish you?” I slam into her. The folders fly off to the floor. “Is this”—*thrust*—“not”—she screams to her God—“hard enough”—*slam*—“for you?”

“Please. Yes. It’s everything.”

“Good girl.” Up she goes. I lift her so her body is flush against mine, my hand on her clit. Mouth on her neck. Sucking. Leaving my mark. “Come for me. Come all over my cock.”

“Can’t.” Her hands rise to my neck, her eyes pinched. “Too…I’m too sensitive.”

“Is that so?” I shove deeper into her, rubbing her just the way she likes.

“Oh—Oh, no. Oh, please, no. Please, don’t stop.” Her head falls against my chest, and I devour her parted lips.

She shivers and spasms on my cock the moment the second orgasm takes over her. I hold her to me, an arm around her waist, drilling into her. Grunting her name with my own release.

“My girl. Mine.” My hand is on her throat as I empty my cum inside her. “You’ll be so beautiful. Swollen with our babies. Take every fucking drop. Take. It.”

She shudders around me. Her dark gaze burrowing into mine. “I’m more than just a womb. I’m more, James. I’m more than that.”

It’s a plea. A statement. A line she draws in the sand.

“You are. You’re so much more.”

I’ve accepted the fact that she’s taken over my life. That she’s laid claim to my rotten soul. There’s no going back from this.

She lowers a hand down her body, taking mine with her. Flattening it against her pussy. “Then yes. I’ll take it,” she says like she has a choice.

She doesn’t.

Neither do I.

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28

JAMES

A few minutes, that's it. I let Ophelia burrow into my body for another few minutes.

I need those minutes to take care of her. So that's what I do, carry her to our room and into our shower.

In our home.

While she was in the cell, I enjoyed her company. The mind games. How she depended on me. Her face lit up as soon as I slipped the gold key into the lock, and that was beautiful.

Convincing myself this was about sex and breeding her only lasted for so long.

This—*she*—is the real thing.

My arm is draped around her middle in the shower, pulling her to me. Close, where I can feel her. Where I can look at her gorgeous face up close.

Hot water cascades down our naked bodies. Ophelia's body is hotter. Far more addictive.

The trust and longing in her eyes are my drug.

I'm careful as I lather shampoo into her hair. As I run the washcloth over her body.

Gently, I spin her, removing her bandage. I press my lips to the scar on her shoulder blades, staring at my initials, and kiss her again.

I spoil her.

For a few more minutes.

A womb. A pretty face. My salvation.

She’s not one thing or the other.

She’s all of it and more.

Ophelia is a diamond gleaming in the sunlight. A million facets, all of them reflecting the light. A stone formed out of hardship. Out of immense pressure.

Look at her now. Look at what she’s become.

My entire universe.

I’m never letting go. No matter what.

I’m the right man for her.

For better or worse.

For the time being, she gets to see my good side. She’s earned it, to have me drying her with a plush towel and bandaging her up.

I dress her in a pair of leggings and a long black T-shirt. A smile tugs at my lips from having her watch me put on gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt.

I’m being considerate, as comforting as possible when I carry her to the dining area and set the massive table for two. One seat next to the other so that I can have her within reach.

I never dreamed I could be addicted to another person’s pleasure. Their soft smiles. Their hand on mine.

I never imagined I’d be this consumed with protecting them.

Ruining the same thing my ancestors and Oliver’s have built isn’t just about me anymore.

Her life. Her next breath. Our future.

Together.

This is what it’s about.

The comfortable silence lasts until I put the dishes—except for her water glass, which is still half full—in the dishwasher.

She. Has. To be. Prepared.

I stand next to her chair. “Get up.”

She blinks, the movement slow. Her exhaustion is palpable. I could use some sleep too. At least for an hour.

No time.

“I said.” My hand is in her damp hair, pulling her out of the chair. Our enemies won’t be considerate. They won’t give a damn if the day wore her out. My dad sure didn’t. “Get. Up.”

“Your eyes.” Of course she sees through me. Notices the change in my mood. We’ve spent hours together. She’s observant. Clever. The perfect person to rule alongside me. “What did I do?”

“The pen to my neck was a good start.” My harsh tone, glare, and words help clear the confusion from her eyes. “I was still able to fuck you, though. I overpowered you. You’re not ready.”

“For what?” This question. The determination in her voice. She demands the truth.

She’s owed the truth.

“The last auction wasn’t supposed to happen.” I tug on her hair until she looks up, right into my eyes. “I’d figured Oliver would come to his senses. That together we could end this. He didn’t.”

No words come out of her mouth. No crying about how harsh I’m being. That’s a good sign—she’s studying her opponent. She’s stronger than the pain.

She makes it easy to open up to her, so I do. I tell her more in detail about the initiations, our bloodline, our traditions. I tell her more about the auction house, the business I consider taking down as well.

I’m ready to put this world behind me. Never look back.

We’ll decide on it later. Together.

“You’re more powerful than he’ll ever be.” Ophelia has no way of knowing that. Then again, I have to be the most fucked-up man she’s ever met. I guess that makes me the most powerful one in her eyes. “Why didn’t you kill him?”

My lips quirk to the side. “I would’ve if I thought he’d refuse. I didn’t, and the element of surprise was gone. Obliterated.” I tug harder on her hair, reminding her to stay alert. “You should always have the edge on your opponents, and I lost mine that day. As soon as the words left my mouth, he turned suspicious. Since then, I had to wait for the right time to make his disappearance acceptable.”

Coward. Procrastinator. Loser. She could’ve called me any of those names.

None of that for Ophelia. If anyone understands me in this world, it’s her.

I’m going to kill Oliver and Camden on my terms. When the time is right.

When they least expect it.

Her jaw tics. Eyebrows lowering. She's so expressive, I might as well be having a tour inside her mind. Watching her cogs spinning.

"I won't be caught off guard again."

"I know." Her passion is tempting. I lower my lips to her jaw, brushing them along her soft skin, sucking on the area below her ear, groaning at her sweet shivering.

"What now?"

"There's still the matter of stopping the forced pregnancies. And you. I'm done locking you up in here like some dirty secret. Problem is, you. Are. Not. Ready." My shadow casts over her. My eyes bore into hers. She's hiding something. "The picture I shoved in your face while I was fucking you? You were vulnerable. Exposed. You won't be that person anymore around anyone else but me. I'm going to teach you to fight."

"Like this?"

A stinging pain in my abdomen. The tip of a knife presses into me.

A knife I forgot to put away.

My nostrils flare. Her eyes shine brilliantly.

"I won. I'm ready." She runs her teeth along her bottom lip, her voice shrill. Slightly unhinged. "Since we're done and all, can you bend me over? All this murder talk gets me so hot. Please."

Her instincts are sharp, having developed over years of needing to defend herself, I see. Sleeping with one eye open would do that to a person.

Mine are sharper. I spent plenty of nights wide fucking awake.

I flip her over, pushing her against the table. The movement is so quick that Ophelia loses her grip on the knife. The moment I hear it dropping on the floor, I pin my cock to her ass, locking my free hand around the back of her throat.

"This isn't what I'd call ready." I squeeze the air out of her while rubbing my thumb along her jaw. "This is raped, tortured, and murdered. If you're lucky."

"Please, don't." Her voice is off. Soft. Pleading. A lie. Then her ass presses to my dick. "Please, sir. Mercy."

She's seducing me. Hoping I'll let her go. That I'll postpone our classes. Not hap—

"And this is *fuck you*." Glass breaks. Catching me—*me*—off guard. My mind's still trying to make sense of the sound when a sharp shard is pinned to my forearm. I got way too close to Ophelia. An oversight on my part.

Because even though she has her back to me, her hands are very much free. “You’ll bleed out before you can get your dick out of your pants.”

I don’t hesitate. Don’t fucking blink, tightening my grip around her neck.

Her eye that’s staring at me widens, mouth parting to suck in air. Fighting against my hold.

“James,” she chokes out. “What the fuck?”

“If you wield a weapon, Ophelia, you better be ready to use it.” My mouth twists in a snarl. “The pen you stuck into me? That was nothing. A scratch.”

She gasps. Steps on my foot over and over. Still holding the broken glass in place.

She’s failing. Not me, herself.

Unacceptable.

“This isn’t a game, damn it.” Adrenaline soaks my veins. Her helplessness does that to me. But I don’t want that now. I want her to do better. She *can* do better. “Fight me. Fucking fight me. You won’t kill me. I’ll—” I can hardly believe I’m about to say this. “I’ll never leave you. But you have to do it. Cut me. Hurt me. Fight back, Sonnet.”

Her growl is agonized, then, there it is. There she is, nicking my skin. My hand stays exactly where it is until she plunges the broken shard deeper. Until the cut turns into a gash, and there’s a puddle of blood gathering on my table.

“Good girl.” I release the pressure on her throat, turn her around, placing her on the table. Stroking the length of her neck. “Such a good girl.”

“Fucker.” She sucks in a deep breath, tilting her head to stare up at me.

Then she continues what she started.

I let her cut me up to my elbow, smirking at the gory sight, then I let go of her throat to rip it from her hand and toss it across the room.

“You’re such an asshole, James.”

“Am I?” I tug on her hair. Just enough to tip her head back. For her to be within reach. So I can kiss her for being so good.

That’s the most affectionate I’ve ever been with another person.

She might call me fucker. She could think that I’m a sadist for this lesson.

Fine by me. Having her fingers dig into the gash in my forearm is just as acceptable.

Later, she’ll see it for what it is.
Later, she’ll thank me.
Later, I’ll get to fuck my captive. The girl I paid for.
The girl I’m training to become a killer.

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29

JAMES

Lying in bed awake at night is pointless.

Work. Plotting. Late-night meetings. There's always something to do instead of lying in my bed, looking around the dark room. Doing nothing.

Only tonight I'm not by myself. I'm not really doing anything.

I have my bandaged arm wrapped around my woman. The one who cut through my skin. Who applied skin glue to patch me up.

I feel the weight of her leg across mine, her breath on my chest.

She gives meaning to my life that has nothing to do with work.

There's a purpose to this moment.

Hugging her. Comforting her in her sleep. Keeping the world at bay while she's dreaming. While she's at her most vulnerable.

Who the hell is this person I've turned into?

Rain pelts against the windows. Harsh and unforgiving.

Nothing wakes her up. She doesn't so much as stir while I protect her.

While I'm back to plotting.

Camden is the least of my worries. He's less known than his father. Less connected.

Everyone welcomed him at the auction and in our firm because of Oliver. If he were to vanish off the face of the earth once Oliver is gone, no one would care.

His disappearance would be a news item for a week or two.

There and gone.

Oliver, on the other hand, they'll hunt him down. They'll be terrified of my reaction. Even more scared of his retribution, in case he resurfaces.

I stroke Ophelia's soft hair. Her tresses part between my fingers. She snuggles closer to me, mumbling in that sweet voice of hers. She's no longer scared of me. Nightmares about her big, bad captor have ended.

I welcome it, tightening my grip on her. I no longer need her constant fear.

When I'm balls deep inside her, yes. When we're awake and need to be on the lookout for our enemies, yes again.

She can rest now.

I've got her.

While she sleeps, I run through the mental notes in my head. The list of people who most likely won't overlook Oliver's disappearance.

The NYPD officials and the police chief. The district attorney. A few FBI agents. Anyone who might pose a threat and take Oliver's side.

Their photos are in the thick file Ophelia went through today. They wait there patiently. Just until Oliver isn't on high alert anymore. Until I decide it's the right moment to strike.

Soon. Any day now.

I'm tired of waiting. Being a sitting duck is sickening.

Cowards wait.

"Hmm."

Ophelia.

Her breasts are warm against my body. Her nipples peaked. Her fingers roam over my chest.

She's up.

Bam. Bam. Bam.

My body goes on high alert. I sit up, my eyes narrowing. My ears perk up to listen.

Someone's at the door, knocking on it. No, slamming their fists on it.

That leaves me with only one person. Only one man can get past the gates and materialize on my doorstep.

My staff isn't allowed to come back for the rest of the week. They wouldn't dare be here against my orders. Even if they had come, they would've buzzed the doorbell. Called me to let them in.

They wouldn't have banged on the door like entitled pricks.

My son would.

He grew up here, after all.

But this isn't his home anymore. I changed the locks and alarm codes everywhere except at the gates once he left. He can park outside, but getting inside? Fuck that.

Bam. Bam. Bam.

My phone flashes. A call from him. Of course it's him.

It gets on my fucking nerves too that he's shown up here unannounced.

I get out of bed, pulling on my sweats and T-shirt from the armchair. Go over to my closet to get what I need to keep her safe.

"James?" Ophelia is beautiful.

The pale glow of the phone highlights her arresting features. Her eyelashes flutter as she focuses on me.

On the roll of duct tape I hold in one hand, then on the two ropes in the other. I brought it up here last week to play with her. Our sex games will have to wait.

This isn't a game.

"You can't be serious."

Bam. Bam. Bam.

The banging is louder than before. Louder than the rain and the wind.

She scrambles to sit, jerking the covers up and over her breasts. "Who's out there?"

"Topher." Ignoring the other questions in her eyes, I climb on the bed and toss the ropes next to her.

"Stop."

The duct tape tastes bitter in my mouth when I tear it. Once done, I throw the roll to the floor.

"Stop it." Ophelia presses herself closer to the headboard, as far away from me as she can. "I'll be quiet. I swear. We're a team, right?"

"We are." I grab her by the throat, keeping her in place so I can press the tape over the corner of her mouth. I need to talk to her before I'm off to confront him. "It's just a precaution. I leave nothing to chance, and that includes you. I can't afford to have you trying to be a hero when you're not ready."

"I am." She slaps me.

I growl because I'm turned on, and because Topher won't stop trying to tear my door down.

Her fingers claw at my bandaged arm, digging into my fresh wound. She doesn't do actual damage. My blood doesn't spill out on my clothes. My shirt remains dry.

"You're the worst." Accusations flare in her eyes before I slam the duct tape onto her mouth.

I have to tie her up. Otherwise, I'd fuck her.

Topher would realize something was up, and I'd either have to kill him or wait for him to collude with my enemies.

The tape goes over the rest of her mouth.

"You're being a brat." I flip her on her stomach, making a work of tying her wrists. "I'm doing my best to protect you, even from yourself." My hand lands on her ass after her wrists are bound. Once. That's all the time I have to spank her. "And that's the thanks I get?"

She screams through the tape, growls at me with her face pressed to the pillow.

She's going to suffocate.

This isn't how she dies. If I have any say in it, she'll never die. I stop trying to tie her up and grab her hair, twisting her head so she's resting on her cheek.

I move on to bind her ankles.

"I'm going to see what he came here for and get rid of him." Once done, I brush her hair off her face. "You're going to be quiet. Be a good girl for me. Stay where you are. You'll be rewarded for it."

She flips me off behind her back. Thrusts her feet back—an adorable attempt to kick me.

I kiss her forehead anyway, then close the bedroom door behind me while the incessant banging continues.

When I open the door, a cold burst of wind and my drenched-to-the-bone son welcome me.

My crying son.

I'm a horrible man. Have done horrible things. But even I'm not so cruel to turn him away when he's like…

This.

"Topher." With a hand on his soaked black wool pea coat, I yank him into the house. I shut the door once he's inside and face him, arms crossed over my chest.

"Dad," he says between sobs.

The men in our family don’t cry. They certainly don’t sob. I take a better look at him. His blue eyes are red. He’s unbalanced, swaying on his feet. Reaching out to me, leaning in.

He reeks of alcohol.

Goddamn it. I lectured him about losing control a thousand times over the years. Secrets slip out when you’re intoxicated. Drinking during his initiation was one thing. I was there to look after him. In Ibiza, he was practically unknown.

Here? What the fuck?

“You’re drunk.” Fuck his tears. His weakness is an embarrassment. “A disgrace.”

“Hey, no. N-no, not drunk. Not reallyyy.” He wipes his wet cheeks with the back of his hand. “I had whiskey at the office. A little. Alone. No one’s there now. I didn’t—No secrets are out, Dad.”

Protecting Ophelia is my number one priority. I need him to leave.

My temples throb. Anger bubbles in my chest.

I can’t kick him out. He’s drunk.

I don’t remember seeing the firm’s driver outside, which could only mean that he drove under the influence.

For the slim chance he called a taxi or an Uber, I ask, “How did you get here?”

“Car?” He grips an invisible wheel, spinning it to the left and right.

“Jesus Christ.” I scoff, helping him out of his coat. “Did you hit anyone?”

“Nooo.” His breath hitches. I’ll have my investigator on it first thing tomorrow morning. “Dad.” He brushes his dark blond hair off his forehead. “I’m fucking crying. Why do you care about what happened to other people?”

My blood pressure skyrockets. The warmth from holding Ophelia is no more.

Why?

Why?

First and foremost, because a hit-and-run is wrong. For fuck’s sake, of course it is.

But my moral compass isn’t what gets me riled up.

Cleaning up this mess means having attention drawn to our family. It means threatening and bribing people.

These are the same people who'll need to be threatened and bribed once I set my plan into motion.

This is one scandal I can't have on my hands. It infuriates me to have to deal with it.

I'm in Topher's face in two seconds flat, hand on the collar of his wet shirt. His mouth gapes when his back hits the wall.

"Crying is useless. Whatever the reason is." He's about to say something. I stop him. "Now think. Did you hurt anyone?"

"Only myself." His eyes darken. "I hurt myself, Dad."

My eyes search his face for injuries. I take a step back, giving the rest of his body a once-over. No blood.

"Ophelia." Some of his strength is back. He shoves my chest, stares at me. His drunk glare focuses a little. "If anyone deserves to ruin her, it's me."

The blood in my veins runs cold for one long beat. Then it boils. Then it's at an inferno-level hot.

"I remember specifically ordering you to forget about her." Watching my tone is a struggle.

I move to create a barrier between him and the stairs. Between him and her.

"I was an idiot." He sniffs. Pushes himself off the wall. Swaying as he battles to stay upright. "I thought it'd be fun. Playing with her. Throwing her away after that. Fuck, even auctioning her and her fear. So fucking ent-ente-entertaining."

He's drunk, I remind myself. *He might not mean it. He could still be spared.*

I'm itching to kill him and end this, regardless.

No one talks about what's mine.

Then I remember his poor mother, and I try, damn it, I try to forgive him. Just this once.

"I always thought about getting her back." Topher stumbles toward me.

He's drunk, not high. If he goes into my bedroom, he'll see her. He'll remember it tomorrow.

He'll seek retribution.

He could force my hand to eliminate the threat, as in him. It will be a spur-of-the-moment decision, and I don't do those.

My father forced my hand once. I had to put a lot of work into making people forget he'd ever existed.

Ophelia isn't the only one who isn't ready. I'm not, either.

I flatten a hand over his chest to stop him.

"She would be fun to torture." His speech is slurry. I'm the most sober I've been in my life. "I could build my own cell at the penthouse." His home in the city. "I'd hurt her there. No one has to know. We could hide it from the Morgans, right, Dad? Why can't I have what I want?"

God help me, another word about torturing her, and I'll slash his throat.

I settle for gripping the collar of his shirt. Leveling him with a glare that means that another wrong word and I'll kill him.

"Dad—"

"You don't love her." I seethe, my control slipping. This scene needs to end, and it needs to end soon. "I can't save you from everything, Topher. Ophelia was sold. Paid for. It's a done deal. The rules say we don't keep women. For any reason. Get over yourself."

"Fuck you." His breath reeks of liquor. His eyes are glossy. But he means what he says. I know my own son. "I'll go looking for her myself. I've been initiated. I have every right to do—"

Thunk.

The sound is loud enough to be heard over the rain.

Topher stops mid-sentence, his eyes shooting toward the ceiling.

I don't wait for him to ask *What was that?*

I don't wait for anything.

"You've got some nerve." My fist connects to his jaw. I've never hit or slapped him before. For Ophelia, I'll do whatever it takes. "Coming to my house, making demands. Undermining my authority."

He stares at me, shocked, blood smeared on the corner of his mouth. "Dad, what the fuck?"

I'm protective. A changed man. A human motherfucking shield. That's what the fuck.

"You'll learn to respect me." I release his shirt, and after a second punch, he's on the floor. I crouch next to him, my fist still clenched. "The hard way."

His hands go up to protect his face. "Dad—"

The third blow knocks him out. As intended.

That's what he'll remember tomorrow. His father losing his temper.

My heart pounds as I stand up, staring at his unconscious body. His pain doesn't bother me.

Ophelia's life does. Resourceful little thing, she must've rolled off the bed. She could be hurt, despite the plush rug softening the blow.

Leaving Topher here, when he could wake up, is reckless. He could catch me when I'm tending to her. He could come up with a knife.

No.

Into the cell he goes.

I squat, hauling him over my shoulder. A strange feeling—some would call it *concern*—nags at my chest. It pushes me to walk faster. I grab the gold keys I hide in my den and dispose of my son in the cell.

He doesn't belong there. He also can't be anywhere near her.

Once he's locked inside, I take the stairs two at a time.

I yank open the door to my bedroom and run to where she waits for me.

On the floor next to our bed.

Fiery dark eyes shoot daggers at me. She screams behind the duct tape, lying on her side and wrestling against the ropes.

Beautiful. Feral. Majestic.

Possibly injured.

"Sonnet."

"Mmmm!"

I go back to the door, lock it behind me, switch on the lamp on the bedside table, and drop to my knees.

Before I tear the tape off her mouth, I slide a hand between her head and the rug. Dry. No bleeding, thank fuck. Next, I trail a hand over her naked body. Her shoulders, breasts, ribs.

She doesn't flinch. Doesn't cry out in pain.

Just screams at me the entire time.

"Good. Nothing's broken." I nod to myself, then narrow my eyes at Ophelia while I carry her to the bed. "I should punish you for what you did."

I didn't think her eyes could get any wider, or that her attempts to scream could get any louder.

Life is a learning curve, I guess.

I throw her on the bed, pinning my hands to my hips. I'd have placed her on the bed if I were a better man.

I am not.

“Punishment for what? Is that what you’re asking?”

She answers me with more muted screams.

I’m reeling from Topher’s deranged pleas. It’s the second time I’ve heard them.

And I hate this, hate worrying for her so fucking much.

“He could’ve come up here.” I move up on the bed, gripping one end of the duct tape. Leveling our gazes. Hers is heated. Furious. I imagine mine is murderous, and yet she doesn’t cower. “You…”

With my free hand, I trail the line of her jaw, my knuckles grazing her skin.

“You could’ve damaged my property. Throwing yourself off the bed like that.”

Tilting my head, I start peeling off the duct tape.

“Do you understand now?” A hint of her hot breath flutters on my fingers. She’s alive, a message that keeps repeating in my head. Alive and blinking furiously at me. “Why my hand itches to belt you until your ass bleeds?”

Ophelia eyes me as if she’s going to shove a knife into my jugular the first chance she gets. The throbbing in my sweatpants is just as violent.

I need to hear her.

Her filthy words. Her accusations. Her cursing me.

Nothing would turn me on more.

Nothing would speak to my hardened soul more.

“When I’m done removing the duct tape, you won’t scream. Blink once if you understand.”

She does. In one pull, I rip it off her.

“Punish me? Seriously?” she whispers, obeying me despite her visibly furious expression. Her muscles strain. “You’re such a bastard. A fucking asshole. Are you fucking serious? You talk about treating me as an equal, teaching me to fight. Then this?”

“What about this?” I reach behind her, undoing the knots around her wrists with one hand.

“You lied.” With her hands freed, she slaps me. I flip her on her stomach, working on her ankles while holding her down. I bathe in her anger. Her fight is just as hot as her submissiveness. “You don’t trust me to do what you say. To not risk our lives. A liar, that’s what you are.”

“Very well.” My aloof response drives her even more crazy. She kicks me, and I grip her foot, biting her ankle, making her hiss in pain. “Now that you’ve got it out of your system, here’s what we’re going to do.”

“You’re going to apologize.”

“No.” I have a hand between her shoulder blades, forcing her down while I climb up the bed and sit up against the pillows. From there, I move her to lie between my thighs.

“Let me go.” She claws at my legs, pushes against them to get up.

I keep her right where she is. “I’m a reasonable owner.”

Her relentless wriggling stops at that. At my cold tone. At being treated like a property rather than a person.

My property.

My lamp doesn’t offer much light. Still, I see her cheeks darkening. I bet she’s so fucking wet for this. “You were cruel.”

“I did what was necessary to protect you.” I brush the soft skin of her temple with my thumb. She leans into my touch, just a little. She won’t be mad for long. Not like it matters. I’d burn the world for her, even if she threw a million tantrums. “I can’t have the future partner in my law firm dead, can I?”

I own her, true.

And she owns a part of me. One I haven’t known existed.

The trust and faith I have in her are unparalleled.

I hate this softness. I welcome it.

“What?” Her death grip on me loosens, confirming how much she wants it too. “Is this another trick?”

“No.” My hand is in her hair, dragging her higher up my body.

“But—But wait…” Her pout is adorable. “Wait. Law school. The bar exam. The other things. You can’t just—”

“I can, and I will.” My hold on her hair isn’t punishing anymore. “Come here.”

That silences her. Without arguing, she does. I tug on her roots once her face is over my cock.

“Good girl.” I take myself out, my fingers curling around the base. “Mouth open. Nice and wide. Want those lips wrapped around my cock.”

Ophelia stares at my throbbing, damp tip, licking her lips.

“You don’t have to worry about a damn thing.”

She lets me lower her face to shove her down until I hit the back of her throat.

Gagging, tears prickle at the corners of her eyes. Pain is good. She can't get too comfortable around me. Even when I use my dick as a pacifier. A tool to calm her down after what I just put her through.

"Shh. That's it. Good girl. Relax for me." Releasing her hair, I stroke the soft strands. "I—*Fuck*." I grit my teeth, digging my heels into the mattress so I don't fuck her face. "Everything will fall into place. Only if you do as I say. Stay in bed tomorrow morning until I tell you it's safe. When Topher is gone. I'll chain you before I'm off to work—"

Her gasp has my cock twitching. My chest heaves.

I'm dying over here, pretending we're sitting at the dinner table instead of having her lips wrapped around my cock.

"Yes, you'll be chained. It gets me through the day. Gets me off to know you're here. That you're mine. And you'll give it to me."

She grazes her teeth over my length. I yank on her hair for a second, then shove her face lower the next.

"I'm doing this for you. Don't fucking bite." Showing her how serious I am, I dip my chin. "You'll sleep better this way. Relax. Breathe. Take it."

She hums for me.

"That's my girl. Such a good fucking girl. Tomorrow, we'll start our lessons. Go over past cases. You'll be at the top of your class. You're the smartest, most infuriating creature. Mine. Mine. Mine."

I say those words to her. Whisper them. Mouth them.

She falls asleep with my assurances. With my dick in her mouth.

So do I.

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30

JAMES

"Dad! Dad!" I hear Topher's wailings echoing through the underground floor. "Motherfucker." A whisper, then, "Dad! I can hear you down here. What the hell. What the fuck. Get me the fuck out of here."

His angry cries only serve to increase my disdain. I take my time walking over to the cell. On my way there, I tune out his miserable screams with memories of Ophelia from this morning. When I helped her off my dick.

When I placed her head on the pillow, then waited for her eyes to flutter open so I could remind her to stay there.

"Dad!" His scream is vulgar, and his fingers are curled on the bars. Knuckles white. Red-rimmed eyes staring at me. "Took you long enough."

"Step back."

He obeys, and I slip the key into the lock, leaving it there for a moment.

Topher's suit is wrinkled. His hair is a mess. He has a swelling, blue bruise on his jaw.

At least he had the sense to wash his face.

I, on the other hand, am ready for the day. My gray suit is pressed, hiding my newly bandaged arm. My jaw is shaved. Hair styled neatly.

"Well?" He raises an eyebrow. "You're here, so it's obviously time. Let me go."

It isn't fucking time.

I have to know if he remembers the loud *thunk* from last night. If he suspects I have someone here. “Why did I throw you in here?”

Topher is in such a volatile state.

The violent side of him rises to the surface, and pissed-off people don’t make for good liars.

I should know. I’m one of the best human lie detectors out there.

Witness after witness thought they could omit facts or trick me while they took the stand. I saw through each and every one of them.

Me and Oliver, my greatest concern at the moment.

I’ll have to keep an eye on him in the coming week.

The last seven days of his life.

For now, Topher is here.

He’s the one on the stand.

If he tries to hide something—anything—I’ll catch it.

“I drove drunk, and you got angry. You locked me down here as a punishment, and I promise you that I learned my lesson, Father.”

“Which is?” *What more aren’t you telling me?*

“Never drive under the influence or drink in public.” He rolls his eyes. My line of questioning bores him, meaning he doesn’t think Ophelia is here, in my house. I don’t show him that I breathe easier at that. “Listen to everything you say. Forget about finding Ophelia, torturing her, and turning her into my broken doll.”

My teeth gnash as I consider dousing him in gasoline and setting the cell on fire.

His poor mother. Her love for him had gotten her killed. It would be wrong to end him on a whim.

Then again, there’s no telling if she’d approve of what he’s become.

His grandfather’s grandson.

Last chance, Topher. Last fucking chance.

“Good.”

I let him out of the cell, walking alongside him as we make our way up.

It’s when we climb the stairs that I let him go first.

He steals a glance of distrust at me, for a good reason. I don’t tell him that, though.

What I do is shoot him a scowl.

“What happened to my face anyway?” he asks at the doorway, apparently clueless.

“You tripped and fell on one of the tables in the living room while drunk.” My voice is sardonic, almost bored. “Don’t you dare show up to the office like this. Stay home until there’s no sign of the bruise.”

“I already took the week off after the initiation.” Lines crease his forehead. The dark circles under his eyes pop out in the early morning light. “People will talk.”

“People will talk, that’s for sure. If you step foot in the office, they’ll talk about you showing up to work like some kind of a lowlife. A nobody who gets into bar fights.” Cold breeze filters into my home. I shove Topher’s keys, coat, and the phone he had there into his hands. “Get the fuck out of here. And for God’s sake, quit fucking drinking. It’s obvious you can’t handle it.”

“What about drinking at home?”

“I wouldn’t have a sip if I were you. Ever again.” A cloud of annoyance settles over me. From having him defy me. From having Ophelia upstairs, naked and unchained and alone. I swallow the urge to punch a hole in the wall. “And for the love of Christ, stop thinking about hurting women.”

“The initiation, though.” Topher won’t let it go. Won’t stop testing me. “The virgins. They’re probably being tortured as we speak. Why aren’t we allowed to do it?”

If his question was, *could we set them free?* I might’ve had some hope for him.

However.

The more he talks, the less I trust him.

“Because you’re my son. Because we’re above the rest. Tell me you understand. That I can trust you.”

His mouth tells me, “Yes.”

His eyes say, *No*.

Unfortunate, really.

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31

OPHELIA

"Be a good girl and wait here for me. Chained to the kitchen island. And no, don't even try picking the lock. You don't want to upset me."

James has been saying the same thing every morning for the last week, before he leaves for work.

Except today, he didn't say that when it was just the two of us. When I was half naked.

His staff was back, and I was dressed in a pair of charcoal-gray leggings and a black T-shirt that he had chosen for me.

He shackled me to the kitchen island, regardless.

As his property—*his girlfriend*, I insisted, yet he ignored me—he had the right to lead me down the stairs. Snap the metal shackle on my ankle in front of the entire staff.

And I let him.

Hours later, I still haven't tried to pick the lock. I'm still here.

So is everyone else. Everyone but James.

"Clara, the bedrooms are clean. Poppy went over the bathrooms," Maisie whispers. Her blue eyes are fixed on the older woman, avoiding me as if her life depended on it. "What's next?"

"Well," Clara starts, returning Maisie's gaze while she wipes the kitchen island. Same as she's done for the last ten minutes.

No detail has been overlooked.

Everything's been taken care of.

Everything. But. Me.

It's not just the two of them.

Throughout the entire day, no one's said a word to me. The sun is already setting in the sky, so I know it's late, and yet they keep pretending I don't exist.

As per *his* orders. They would never go against him.

My screams didn't stop anyone from going about their business. They've been turning their back on me. Slipping out of my grip whenever I launched for their chignons that were twisted low on their napes.

It didn't escape me that they pinned their hair into a twist using hair elastics.

Not a single bobby pin in sight.

Again, as per his orders.

"Hair elastics?" I spun toward James this morning, hands on my hips.

"Part of the new dress code." The bastard shrugged, gorgeous in his dark blue suit and perfect hair. His knuckles brushed my jaw, and my traitorous face leaned into him. "They won't talk to you, either. I wouldn't bother if I were you."

"Why?" I growled, despite finding comfort in his touch. Then whispered, "It's humiliating."

"That's a problem because?"

"Well—"

"Be honest, Ophelia." He lowered his mouth to my ear, talking in a hushed voice meant only for me. "How wet are you for this? I bet you're soaked. You must be ruining your lace panties as we speak. You're such a slut for being my property, aren't you?"

I was. I bit the inside of my cheek, flexing my thighs so I wouldn't clench them in front of him.

"I'm going to escape. I hope you realize that." The lapel of his jacket crumpled in my fist. My face burned. The need to kill him and the need to fuck him were equally powerful. "I'll pick this stupid lock and slip outside. Someone will leave one of the doors open, and I'll be gone. Fuck you and fuck your training and fuck this."

His hand clasped on my hip, and he yanked me closer. Our foreheads pressed. His icy-blue eyes were as cold as ever.

"Don't underestimate my obsession with you. The things I'd do for you. The lengths I'd go to have you." He stole my breath away with a few words.

My throat locked. “Own you. Keep you. You can run from me. You might die trying. But know this: I’d shove my hand past the gates of heaven and drag you back here myself. Wherever you go, that’s where I’ll be.”

He straightened, slipping the button of his suit jacket into the loop. His face betrayed nothing. My insides were melting.

“Be a good girl and wait here.” His manly cologne made me even hotter for him, damn it. “Chained to the kitchen island. And no, don’t even try picking the lock. You don’t want to upset me.”

Waiting for him, accepting my situation, reminds me of the time in the cell, but in a good way.

I have more freedom here. The chain is long enough for me to reach the guest bathroom and the living room. The dining room. I can stroll around the kitchen.

The staff prepares the meals in the larger kitchen on the other side of the mansion, and despite their silent treatment, they serve me breakfast and lunch. Coffee and other drinks.

They placed three water bottles on the kitchen island, along with an assortment of fresh fruit for me. The fridge here is stocked. I have everything they do in the other, larger kitchen where the chef cooks.

Even being ignored isn’t as horrible as I thought it would be.

James was right.

I am turned on. Not by them. I’m a slut for waiting for him. Longing for him. Missing him.

While I’m chained and humiliated.

It’s a pressure on my ribs. A constant fluttering in my belly. An insistent humming, tugging, craving in the back of my head.

A need to please him. To be owned by him.

I…

I…

I love him.

Fuck. I love him.

His dark aura. His constant, undivided attention once he’s home.

The lessons he’s been giving me.

Some are spent in his den, where he goes through his old cases with me and reads me from other law textbooks.

The others are brutal. He teaches me how to fight, and the man doesn’t cut corners.

James chokes me, thrusts me against walls, pins me to the floor when I manage to escape.

He praises me whenever I find random objects around the house and use them as makeshift weapons. When I hit and cut through his clothes. His skin.

When we're alone at night, after his lessons are done, I get my rewards. He fucks me. He bites me. Leaves marks on my breasts. His fingers are imprinted on my inner thighs.

The things he tells me only fuel my obsession with him. He wants to breed me. Tells me I'll be swollen with his babies any day now.

I love him so much that it's impossible to remember what life was like before him.

And the best part?

He loves me back. I'm sure he does.

"Mr. Hawthorne will be home soon." Clara's voice snaps me out of my daydreams. Clara, mentioning *my* man. Talking about him with someone else. I shoot her a glare she doesn't return. "Go tell the chef he can start working on their dinner."

"No." That's where I draw the line. They won't make me disposable to him. It's old school as fuck. It shouldn't mean so much to me. It does. He's mine. "I'll fix his dinner."

James has been in charge of our meals for the past two weeks. The man moves effortlessly around the kitchen, baking, cooking, or sautéing stuff. His Eggs Benedict are out of this world.

Most I can do is put the takeover leftovers in the oven or microwave.

Still.

He's mine. I'll be damned if he'll eat someone else's food.

"We had fresh filet mignon delivered this afternoon," Clara continues addressing Maisie, though her shoulders are hunched. She's on high alert, turning her body completely away from me. "Mr. Hawthorne hasn't had that in over two weeks."

Since the night he and Topher threw me in the cell.

The temperature of my body rises. Up, up, up. My fingers clench on the kitchen island. I'm not upset at the memory.

Wish I was.

It's her. She has no right.

"Clara, so help me—"

“Off you go.” She snaps her fingers to Poppy and Maisie.

They turn, ready to take off.

I grab a plate, smashing it against the island’s counter. The sliced strawberries on it fly off.

Gasps and “oh my God” echo in the kitchen.

The chaos works to my advantage. I’m quick to grab Clara by her chignon, pressing the broken shard of the plate to her throat.

James would be proud.

My mouth presses to her ear, eyes glued to the other two women.

“Now.” I press my weapon closer to Clara’s throat. I hear her heart beating. “Who’s making James’s dinner? Tell me. Better yet, tell *them*.”

She gulps.

A drop of blood trickles to the neckline of her black uniform dress.

The other two women stare at me, their eyes bulging out.

Poppy gasps.

Maisie isn’t as composed. Her lips twist, and I see the moment she’s going to snap. That she’s going to scream.

“Make a sound, and I’ll murder the three of you,” I hiss at Poppy. She rushes to her brunette friend, clasping her hand over her mouth in shock. “Good. Look, ladies, I’m not mad about the auction. I’ve forgiven you for playing along.”

“Mr. Hawthorne,” Clara breathes. “This isn’t his fault. Don’t poison his food.”

“Your loyalty is admirable. Defending him when your life is on the line.” It truly is. I’m mildly shocked. “When he has men and women everywhere to keep him safe.”

When he’s the strongest, most imposing man I’ve ever met.

“Please.” I have no intention of killing her. James would be upset if I did. I’d hate to upset him. “He’s a good man. Deep down. The best one.”

She’s talking about the girls he’s saved. She probably knows about Topher’s mom, at least. I think. I think she’s already guessed it, the observant woman she is.

“You think I don’t know my owner?”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” It’s important to her that I repeat these words. She needs to make sure that I’ll never hurt him. “My owner.” I won’t tell her I love him before I tell him. That’s where I draw the line. “He’s mine as

much as I'm his. I won't murder the man I'm planning to spend the rest of my life with."

Something's come over me. A kind of possessiveness I've never felt before. The kind that makes me want to scream at the top of my lungs that I'm his. That he'll forever be mine.

The two other girls stare at me. Their shock is still present, written all over their faces.

I also hear the gardeners talking outside. They're close. They might try to stop me.

And James could be watching.

Which, I really need to ask him that. If he has cameras here. Too bad that it turns me on, this guessing game.

I'll think about. Later. Now, I have to hurry.

He could be on his way, fully intending to discipline me. He could stop me from doing this one act of kindness for him.

No. No, no, no.

"Topher?" she asks. Not the young Mr. Hawthorne.

A satisfied hum rumbles in my chest. This sign of disrespect was the final proof I needed to tell me where her loyalties lie.

"I was going to break up with him."

"Miss Monroe." This is Poppy, her voice quivering. I've always loved my family's last name. The last memory of my parents. Today, the sound of it rankles me. I belong to James. "Please. Let her go. No one has to get hurt."

"No one will if you just fucking listen to me."

"It's the chef's job." Clara stays very still. I look at her hands, pleased that they clutch her apron instead of reaching for the kitchen island for her own broken shard. She won't hurt me. "You can rest. Read a book. Please."

James biting into the food the chef prepared.

James saying, *delicious, don't you think?*

James enjoying anything that doesn't involve me.

Like hell.

"Here's how it's going to go." The power I hold in my hands changes me. It's inappropriate to smile at a moment like this. Laughing is even worse. Yet here I am. Chuckling. "You three go back to your quarters. Tell the chef to go to his. By the way, there's no need to get me anything from the other kitchen. I was here when they stocked the fridge."

“I—Okay, okay.” Clara’s pulse isn’t as fast as it was two minutes ago. She’s settled, deciding she should trust me. She points to the landline phone on the kitchen counter, the one that’s connecting the mansion to the staff’s quarters. “Dial nine if you need anything.”

The adrenaline that swarmed through my veins has simmered. The urge to sink my teeth into something—or someone—slowly drifts away. I’m a functioning member of society again. Sort of.

“I won’t be needing you.”

I release her, jerking my chin toward Poppy. She understands, letting go of Maisie’s mouth. The three women are silent, seemingly shocked.

It’s my turn to ignore them, to do what I have to. I grab a cloth from the counter and start dabbing the bleeding nick on Clara’s throat.

“I’m sorry, Clara.”

“No harm done.” Snapping out of it, she raises her chin, squaring her shoulders as if nothing happened here. “We’ll be getting out of your hair. No one will come in here; you have my word.”

“Good.” I jab a finger just below her collarbone. She flinches.

I look down at my other hand. At the plate I haven’t let go of.

Oops.

“Was there something else?” she asks.

“Yes.” I clear my throat. “If I so much as smell a whiff of food coming from the other kitchen, I’ll murder the chef and everyone else here. It’s a promise.”

Of course I won’t. Now that I’m not seeing red anymore, I understand how wrong it is.

They don’t have to know that.

“Certainly.” She smooths the skirt of her dress. A small smile plays on her lips. Hmm, curious. The water here must be poisoned, making people act a little crazy. “He’ll be home in less than an hour.”

I throw the broken plate behind me, nodding as if I know how long it takes to prepare any sort of meal.

They leave me alone, and I…

I pray.

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32

JAMES

Contrary to what Ophelia believes, I don't have cameras inside the house. Other than the one in the cell, of course, which was put there for a specific reason.

To stalk Ophelia.

She's been searching for them, though she hasn't flat-out asked me about it. I see her glancing at the corners of each room when she thinks I'm not watching.

Sneaky.

I don't tell her that having cameras in our home is a vulnerability I can't afford to have. An enemy could hire a hacker to break into my system.

They—Oliver and Topher included—could pay whatever it takes. Use whatever they unravel to extort me.

But God, do I wish I had a million cameras in every room of the house.

Every day I spend in the office without her carves a deeper hole in my chest. I miss her so badly that my heart feels like it weighs a million pounds when she's out of my sight.

Getting off on her humiliation isn't nearly as satisfying as looking at her. Holding her.

I clutch my fingers on the steering wheel of my SUV as I sit in my driveway, watching my home.

My cock is hard. Muscles flexing beneath my suit.

This is what this has come down to. This is the man I've become after hours upon hours of denying myself the one thing I truly care about.

Ophelia.

Every time one of the staff members turned their back on her, she must have been furious.

Her cheeks probably flushed red.

I haven't texted or called Clara to check on Ophelia. Haven't needed a report on how she's been doing.

She's mine. Whatever she's been going through belongs to me. I'll hear it from her lips.

Me.

My obsession with her is reaching terrifying levels. I'm aware.

It is what it is.

Looking in the rearview mirror, I hardly recognize the man staring back at me.

My eyes are cold as ever. My expression is bare of any emotion.

That's what I let everyone in the office see today, especially when they asked about Topher. When I told them he'd come down with the flu.

Nevertheless, I'm not the same.

I'm excited.

I've never been eager to come back from the office. To a woman, no less.

I don't even remember the last time I had sex before Ophelia. Waste of time, breath, and effort.

My time, my breaths, my efforts, they're all Ophelia's now.

I'm addicted. Whipped.

In love.

"Shut up, motherfucker," I scold myself and go to her.

The first thing I notice is the silence inside the house. No shoes clicking on the floor. No clattering of plates as they're being set on the table.

Second thing is the smell. Something's burned.

My heart slams against its cage; my feet carry me at full speed toward the kitchen, where the smell is coming from.

She could be lying there dead.

My staff would know how furious I'd be if anything happened to her. It could be the reason they haven't called to inform me about it.

They're afraid of me.

They're right to be.

As soon as I'm in the kitchen, my fear vanishes as quickly as it came.

Ophelia’s there.

Alive.

Dragging her chain as she paces in the opposite direction of me.

Breathing.

Huffing.

Alive.

You love her.

Fine. Fuck. I do. No other way to explain the immense relief surging through me.

If that’s what love is, then fine. I accept.

I love her.

It’s sick. A terrible weakness. No wonder my father had been against it.

But fuck, this relief. It’s like having a C4 detonate inside my body, leaving me to suffer one aftershock after the other.

I need an outlet for the pain.

And she’s going to give it to me.

She’ll let me drive myself inside her until neither of us can breathe. She’ll be screaming my name over and over when she comes.

She’ll beg me to stop.

I will do no such thing.

I’ll fuck her for hours, filling her with my seed over and over again.

Ophelia will learn what it means to make me feel.

I’ve made it one step toward her, ready to strip her. Torture her. Punish her.

“Stupid electric stove.” Ophelia taps a hand over her thigh. “Too hot, too cold. It can’t fucking decide, can it? How am I supposed to fix him dinner if this is what I have to work with? It’s the stupid thing’s fault, right? Not mine. I’m not the one who’s ruined ten steaks. The goddamn stove did. Not. Me. I haven’t failed. I’m not the one who’ll disappoint James. Ugh.”

My brow furrows. Head tilting to the side.

She tried to cook?

For me?

It’s then that I see it. The pans towering in the sink. The oil splotches on the stove and counter. There aren’t any fruit plates on the kitchen island. Only two clean plates, two sets of steak knives and forks.

I can’t take it. This longing. This need.

The warmth spreading through me is insufferable.

Twenty steps and I’m behind her, almost touching.

She’s still cursing the air. “Maybe one minute next time? I know, I know. It’ll be raw. Some of the customers at Laurier’s liked it that way, though. He might like it too.”

“Sonnet.”

The woman I met weeks ago would’ve shrieked.

This version of Ophelia spins to me. She has a broken plate in her hand that I didn’t notice since I was too busy taking in this scene.

“We’re having cereal for dinner.” She pins the sharp point of the shard to my chest. “And that’s final.”

A laugh bubbles in my throat. It’s so fucking foreign that I wonder if I’m having a seizure.

“What?” The corners of her mouth tip up. The plate remains exactly where it is, poking at my shirt. “Why are you laughing?”

The stinging sensation is welcome. I’m proud of her for keeping her guard up.

Let’s see if she’s truly ready.

“Cereal?” My question is meant to throw her off.

Sadly, it does the trick. Her smile widens. “Why not? I mean, I tried to cook an actual meal. But I ruined the last filet so—”

I steal the broken plate from her, ignoring the pain when it cuts into my palm. I have exactly one second left of Ophelia’s confusion, and I use it well. Turn her. Slam the front of her body to the window wall. Pin her there by my hips.

Her chain clinks along the wood floor. I get off on the sound, on owning her so thoroughly.

My hand winds its way through her long, soft hair. For a second, I let myself lean in to inhale the scent of her shampoo.

Ophelia’s struggles only serve to make my cock harder. Her growl is both aroused and upset. “Argh! You’re infuriating.”

“I laughed because you’re adorable.” I sound soft. Yanking her by her hair and slicing off a lock of it is anything but.

Once I have the lock of hair in my palm, I throw the broken plate to the floor. It shatters into smaller pieces. I assume. I’m too engrossed in Ophelia to look anywhere else. To care about anything else.

That maddens me further. I tug harder on her hair. Rock my hips into her even harder.

The glass wall rattles.

“I’m not adorable,” she growls, twisting her head as much as my hold on her allows. Her dark eyes are accusatory. She fights me while I pocket the lock of her hair. “I was going to get dinner ready. What’s adorable about that? You know what”—*moan*—“let’s just say, for argument’s sake, that I am.”

“You are.”

“Ugh.” She stomps on my shoe. I let her. “If I’m so goddamn adorable, why are you hurting me?”

When violence doesn’t work, she pushes her ass to my cock.

“I’m training you; there’s a difference. Besides, I enjoy hurting you. I’ve been fantasizing about it all day. About you.” I pull back to lower her leggings and panties. I’m an aggressive bastard. Impatient as I take myself out. “You made me fall for you. I love you, Ophelia. It’s an inconvenience. Spit.”

“I—What?”

“Spit.” My hand is right under her mouth. “I won’t ask you twice.”

“What for?” Her breaths are hot on my palm. Her fear and excitement are intoxicating. “I’m wet.”

“Your ass isn’t.”

There’s a bottle of lube in my bedside table drawer. Another one is in my office. Both were put there for her.

No way am I am leaving her long enough to get either of them.

“Oh,” she whispers, then spits while grinding her naked ass into my cock.

“Jesus, you’re a filthy one.” I’m turned on. An animal. I yank her head back up, and she gasps so pretty for me. I take advantage of that too, spitting into her open mouth. “Spit that in my hand too.”

Her eyes are furious. That doesn’t stop her from doing as I said. From pushing her hips back, begging for my cock.

“You love me,” she accuses. “You love me.”

“I love my steak too.”

She blushes, the pink color spreading across her nape. I’m a bastard for getting turned on by that. For stretching her ass with two wet fingers. Precum wets the tip of my cock when she groans in pain.

“But there’s none here.” I rub the spit on my cock. Watch her face turning into a picture of resolution. “No staff, either.”

“Mine,” she grits out behind clenched teeth, spreading her legs. “I threatened them. Told them to leave for the day before they could get to dinner. You’re mine. I’m more than a womb. More than a plaything to wait for you here. I—”

I pull my fingers out of her, lifting her hips. I press her face to the window with my clean hand.

We both moan when the head of my cock slips past the rim of her tight hole.

“You what?” I’m breathing hard, spitting on my hand to lube my dick again. Hanging by a thread, desperate to tear into her.

“James.” Hot tears follow. Angry tears, judging by the way she bares her teeth at me. There’s fire in her eyes. “I love you.”

Her words settle inside my heart. She’s building a house there. A mansion. No plans to leave.

Not like I’ll ever let her.

“It hurts.” The first sign of vulnerability from her.

That angers her more than anything.

She thinks she’s disappointing me.

God, another second of not ramming into her, and I’ll die.

“Shh. You’re so good. You can take it. Take it like a good fucking girl.” Another inch, and I almost come right there. Inside her. “Fuck, you’re tight. Your virgin ass is sucking me in.” She clenches her hips. I go deeper. “You’re so good. Got such a hot little ass. You’ve been saving it for me, haven’t you?”

She huffs. Her tears stain the window.

I don’t stop, spitting on my hand, lubing my cock, pushing in. With my free hand, I lean forward, gathering her arousal from her cunt and using it to rub her clit.

“Words, Ophelia.” I’m about halfway in, my lips pressed to her temple as I sink deeper into her. “Tell me how bad you want it. How you’ve been waiting for me to take you here.”

“I do. Only you. Please, fuck me.” The last of her tears trickle down her cheeks. She glares at me, fighting, but this time, not against me. Ophelia’s trying to get every inch of me inside her. “Fuck my ass. Show me just how much you own me. How much you love me.”

The way I love her hurts her. It’s evident in her scream. In her frozen expression. Her fingers flex on the window when I thrust hard and fast into

her ass, and she wants it.

Otherwise, she wouldn't have kept her beautiful face pressed into the window.

"Stop, stop. I—No more." Her pupils are blown. Her body attempts to get closer to the window. Far from me. "It hurts too much. Stop. James!"

"Properties don't get to say no." I have both hands digging into her hips now. My mind is a mess. I'm an animal, claiming her in the most basic and vile, brutal way. Marking my territory from the inside out. "Properties stay where they are. They let their owners do anything to them."

"It"—*thrust*—"hurts. So good. But it hurts. Fuck."

"You're strong enough to take it. You should see yourself." My attention splits between her profile and her ass. "How your ass stretches around my cock." I spit on my hand, more lube. Keep fucking her. So good. So fucking good. "How deep you're taking me."

"Stop. Stop."

She tries to get away again. All it does is offer me a better angle. A better hold on her. I use my grip on her hips, moving her body on me. Slamming her on my cock.

We both curse. I bite her shoulder, a few inches over her scar. A moan—fucking moan—escapes me.

"You're a bastard," she screams. Growls. Cries out. "An asshole for making it feel so good when it hurts. I hate you. I hate you so much."

"You love me." I slide a hand to her front, rubbing her clit. "You love the wrong man. A mistake on your part. Same mistake I made, which was falling for you. I didn't want to, just like you didn't. Couldn't help it, either."

Her breaths leave vapor on the glass. She's giving everything she has to stop this orgasm. Muscles strained. Eyes pinched.

"Look at me."

There's that fire again. Threatening to ruin me. I rut into her. Stretch her. Pleasure her.

If I died right now, I'd die a happy man.

"What?" she says between moans, her voice tight.

"Come for me." I rub her faster. Pinch and tug and torture her clit, making her eyes roll to the back of her head. "Come and I'll tell you"—*grunt*—"just how thoroughly you've ruined me."

“Fuck.” Her orgasm is as much of a force as she is. Ophelia shakes as she cries out my name. Tells me she hates me.

“You’ve made a home where no one else has been before.” With those words, with both hands on her hips, with my ribs cracking from how much I love her, I come. I empty myself in her ass, my fingers digging into her sweet flesh. “Inside my heart. You’re fucking there, and you’re never leaving. You’re never leaving me. They’ll have to pry you from my cold, dead hands, and I’ll still be holding on to you. Always.”

“James.”

I kiss her shoulder. Her neck. Press my lips to the shell of her ear.

“You love me.”

“Yes.” I’ll repeat it for as long as she asks me to. “I do.”

Our cereal dinner will have to wait. I have to take care of her.

First, the ankle cuff has to go. I pull out of her, lowering to my knees. I have one hand on her back to keep her from falling as I unlock the ankle cuff.

“You love me,” she murmurs.

“Yes.” Again. The cuff falls open. She’s in my arms, clinging to my neck, her cheek pressed against my shoulder. “Loving you scares me. It infuriates me, just the idea of it. Because I know I feel it, but I don’t have the first idea on how to love. I’m not sure if I can ever give you what you need.”

“As long as you love me.” Her fight has dwindled into nothing, giving way to exhaustion. Eyes at half-mast. Arms limp around my neck as I carry her upstairs. “You called it an inconvenience.”

“Loving you is inconvenient.”

“Fuck you.”

“Pretty sure I just did.” That earns me a surprised laugh. I’m teaching her about my world, but fuck. I wouldn’t mind breathing in some of her sunshine in return. “Ophelia.”

I put her down in our bathroom. One hand is placed firmly on her waist, while the other is under her chin, pulling her in for a kiss.

“You let me distract you down there.” I swipe my tongue along the seam of her lip. Kiss her. Bite her. “We’ll be having a guest sometime this week. Oliver. You can’t be distracted around him. Around anyone, ever.”

Pressing my lips to hers, I swallow the breath she sucks in.

“You’ll be there with me.” At that, dark eyes stare up at me. It won’t be long before she falls asleep. “I need you there. You’re a part of my DNA. My ribs. My heart. We’re doing this together.”

She raises a hand to my cheek, and I don’t stop her. “I’ll do better.”

Despite her exhaustion, I say, “This isn’t the first time you’ve had to stand up for yourself.” I’m talking about her years in foster care. I need to know. Not so I could use the information against her.

I’m curious about her. Just her.

She nods.

“Tell me about it. In detail.”

Her eyes are droopy. Her body clings to mine, her knees threatening to buckle. She’s tired. I don’t care. I need to hear how my brave girl managed to survive. I need to avenge her.

Once we eliminate the immediate threat, they’ll pay for what they did to her. Every last one of them.

“What part?” Her speech is slow. Sluggish.

I kiss her, praising her for being so good for me. “The names of the people who hurt you.”

“Most of them didn’t.” Her lips curve into a sad smile. “I missed my parents. That was no one’s fault.”

“What part was their fault?”

The way I’m holding her has to be hurting her. I’m pinning her to me. Fingers digging into her soft chin. My anger at them is projecting onto her.

For her, I’ll use that energy to fix years of pain, years of emptiness. Ophelia will never be alone again. No one will hurt her ever again, and those who did will have hell to pay.

“Ophelia.”

She blinks, waking up. Reluctantly. “Two kids bullied me.” Her chin lifts. She isn’t giving her past the power to control her. My chest fills with pride. “One foster mom out of the three homes I went through slapped me around for no reason. I swear. I never did anything wrong.”

“Of course you didn’t.” I didn’t need to be there to know that. Ophelia talks back. She’s feisty. But no one should lay a finger on a kid. On Ophelia, of all people. “Consider them dead.”

“I—” She sighs, a little scared. A little hopeful. “I only have their names. It—It’s been a while. I don’t know where they live.”

“Their names and the neighborhoods you grew up in are more than enough information for me to go on.”

“James.” Her chin quivers. Lips pinched. Gratitude rolls from her in waves. “Wait. Um. Is this another test? Another game?”

“No more of those tonight.” I brush my lips along her jawline. Then behind her ear, pressing a million kisses to the sensitive area. She shivers so prettily for me. “I owe you this gift. Your revenge. For being so good. So mine. First, we take down the most imminent threat, then we’ll go after anyone who’s ever hurt you.”

“Thank you.” She twists her head, stealing a kiss. “Thank you.”

The silence between us is charged. Normally, I wouldn’t care.

Tonight, it’s killing me. “You have questions.”

“Yes.” Nodding, she nuzzles her nose to mine. The intimacy is unfamiliar but not unwelcome. “Your dad. He was cruel. To you. Is that why you’re going to kill the people who hurt me? Is that about him?”

“Yes and no.” My honesty and openness are just as unnatural as our intimacy. “I’ll destroy them for the simple reason that no one gets to touch you and live.” Even my son. I thought he could change. Show remorse. I know better now. “And yes, Ophelia. I understand what it’s like better than most. To be terrorized in your own home. But I don’t care about my father. He’s gone. This has nothing to do with him and has everything to do with you.”

Ophelia is silent, offering me the space to talk. I’m hardly interested in that anymore. I’ve talked plenty for tonight.

She trusts me.

I won’t fail her.

I. Won’t. Fail. Her.

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33

JAMES

"James, a word?" Oliver steps into my office, announcing himself rather than asking to come in.

He's been doing it every day for the past two weeks. Ever since Topher banged on the door to my home. Well, almost every day. Over the Thanksgiving holiday, when our offices were closed, he'd been at the auction house. I'd been home all that time, where I was spared of his company.

I'm sure he hadn't been any less suspicious of me while he was overseeing the operations there. He might have even stopped by the office to go through my things.

He wouldn't have found a damn thing.

The only secret I have—other than my plans—is Ophelia. The only thing worth keeping.

And she wasn't here during the Thanksgiving holiday. She was holed up with me over the break. Safe. Thoroughly fucked. Cared for.

When I wasn't balls deep inside her, eating her out, or making her choke on my dick, she'd been hard at work.

Learning.

Practicing the art of killing a person.

Going over my old cases and other law textbooks.

Listening to me. Telling me about herself. Whether it was late at night or just before sunrise, we'd talk. I couldn't stop listening to her and drawing

out stories about her parents. About the few childhood friends she almost forgot about. The foster parents who showed her kindness.

She'd tell me she loved learning from me.

That she loved me, period.

It was still strange, yet I never rejected the words.

Like I never rejected her attempts to cook for me.

I ate everything that came out of her hands. Praised her for all of it. The cereal and the burned or raw steaks. Salads, she was good at mixing those.

Other times, she let me cook for her.

It was the best holiday of my life.

Even Topher hadn't been allowed anywhere near the mansion. He reported to me that he was hunting for a woman to breed. I assumed it was a lie. Two investigators had taken turns watching him, proving me right.

He hadn't been hunting for a new woman. He'd been out there, asking people about Ophelia.

I've been keeping that part from her.

He's my responsibility, and I'll handle him accordingly. One way or the other.

There's just one minor bump in the road.

My PI, who regularly checks my phone, found a bug and removed it.

Oliver isn't as rash and weak as his son. Topher had been monitored the entire time.

It couldn't be anyone except Oliver.

Who's here, playing this redundant cat-and-mouse game.

One he's losing.

"Can it wait?" I rise out of my chair, buttoning up my suit jacket. Charcoal today, Ophelia's favorite. Oliver wears a similar one in a lighter shade of gray. "We're headed to court."

Topher and Camden will be tagging along to observe. Their presence isn't required. Neither of them will live to become lawyers.

But optics matter.

Optics are everything.

"Right. Right." Oliver laughs, and it's fake. He shakes his head. Another warm, phony gesture. "How could I forget about the Irish? Camden won't shut up about it. He's been over the moon about his uncle taking him to court."

Now I *know* he's fucking with me.

I’ve never been an uncle figure to Camden. Hardly even been a father to Topher.

Being warm and fluffy, I don’t have that in me.

Or so I thought.

Ophelia says I do. She thanks me for being kind and for tucking her to my side when we go to bed. When I flatten my palm on the place where I branded her. Even though it’s healed, it hurts her a little.

But she likes the pain, always snuggling closer to me when I touch her there. My whimpering and sweet Ophelia.

With her on my mind, I steel myself against my opponent.

The muscles on my face are frozen. My expression is locked firmly in place.

He’s baiting me.

Still unaware that I’m the apex predator.

He’s about to have a rude awakening.

“Why don’t you come over for drinks tonight?” My voice is deceptively kind.

I pull it off by picturing Ophelia’s face first thing in the morning. When the dawn slowly steals away the night. The soft glow of the sun highlighting the color of her cheeks, plump lips, long lashes.

He eyes me warily.

“I’ve been a recluse lately. Watching our kids turn into men. It did a number on me.”

His lifted eyebrow gives him away. My attitude isn’t anything he’s been expecting.

“I’m ready for company.” Smiling would raise his suspicions. I gesture to the two of us instead, giving him a false sense of friendship. “Let’s have drinks together.”

“Fuck. You’re serious.” He runs his hand through his hair and arranges it back in place. “You’re telling me you were being cagey because, what? You’re having some sort of a midlife crisis?”

“Speak for yourself.”

The clouds thicken outside my window. A storm is brewing in the distance. Soon, it’ll rain. The drops will patter on the window of the courtroom and work.

While I plot Oliver’s murder.

And think of Ophelia.

I imagine her at home, talking to Clara after she's threatened them. In my mind's eye, I see her staring out into the backyard, or catching up on her learning material.

Wearing my cuff around her ankle.

I slip my hand into my pants pocket, pretending I'm looking for something.

There it is. I close my fingers around the lock of her hair. The one I cut off her beautiful head.

Soft. Warm.

Mine.

A thin strap of tape binds the hairs together. I take it with me wherever I go.

"Sure feels like it some days." Oliver's laugh comes off as more genuine this time.

It's not like him to be gullible. To be duped.

This can't happen to Ophelia.

This afternoon, once I'm home, I'll be cruel again. Right before I tell her we'll be having a guest over later tonight.

More than cruel. I'll be downright vicious. Cold.

Her owner.

It'll be a delicious lesson. She'll be stronger for it.

Ready for Oliver.

"Dad, are you coming?" Topher's voice reaches from the hall, coming closer.

"Yes." I open my palm, release the lock of her hair into my pocket, and grab my bag. "See you at ten," I tell Oliver.

A clipped nod from my *friend*, and I'm off to meet Topher, Camden, and Miley, my associate on the case. We walk together to the bank of elevators.

"You going to slay them today, James?" Camden's amused, as usual. Everything's a fucking joke to this kid. Unfortunate for him that death is a very, very serious business.

"We don't *slay* anyone."

Topher shoots me a look.

I don't hold his gaze, affixing it to the elevator doors. He'll have to take up his Daddy issues with someone who actually gives a damn.

Brett, one of the firm's drivers, greets us at the company's SUV, and we climb inside. The three of us in the back of the car. Less than ideal since I

don’t want to be anywhere near the two of them.

But giving my back to my enemies is out of the question.

Miley takes the passenger seat. She pulls out her phone and starts talking to our client as soon as Brett puts the car into gear. Part of her responsibilities is to ensure that they’re there an hour before the trial starts.

Neither I nor my clients have ever shown up late to court. I won’t start just because my mind is going in a million directions. I hold a level of respect for the system I’m rigging.

“We had an awesome time away from the office, Dad and I.” Camden directs this at me. Topher already heard all about the Morgans’ holiday. I have my investigators to thank for that information. “We ate, like, a ton. Watched movies together. Slept. Did some…searching.”

As I stare at him from my place near the window, I wonder if I’ll be doing him a favor by killing him. Euthanasia of some sort.

Camden wags his eyebrows at me. I refrain from rolling my eyes in response.

“Topher needs to step up his game.” He slaps my son’s shoulder. “It’ll be so cool if we end up like our dads.”

Miley and Brett would never understand what he’s implying. He’s putting us at risk regardless. “Cut it out.”

A bump in the road throws Topher, who sits between the two of us, in my direction.

It takes him a minute to return to his seat.

A minute in which his pants pocket rubs mine.

Once. That’s all it takes for Ophelia’s lock of hair to be pushed out of my pocket.

I sense it before I see it. I’m as attached to these few strands of her hair as I am to the rest of her.

Completely. Irrevocably. Maddeningly.

And when my fingers flatten on them to put it back in its place…

When my gaze goes there…

So does Topher’s.

I catch him staring at my fingers. At the lock of hair I’m trying to cover. A black lock of hair, the color so deep it’s nearly raven-black.

It could belong to any number of people in the city. In the state.

In the motherfucking country.

But unlike Camden, my son is a bright one.

He puts two and two together, his pale blue eyes darkening. They latch onto mine, doubting. Accusing.

Loathing.

Unflinching, I stare back at him. My son won't threaten me. No one will.

Only her.

Only ever her.

My heart is about to leap out of my chest. It's a lot of work to keep my pulse in check. To lock down my possessiveness and jealousy.

He has no claim on Ophelia.

Never has.

She was always meant to be mine.

I don't so much as blink.

In the front of the SUV, Miley sounds pleased with what our client is telling her. "Sounds great. Nothing to worry about. We'll be there in thirty and talk some more. Good. Good. Yes. See you there."

Topher holds my gaze for the rest of her conversation. Murder bleeds from him, tainting the clean air in the car. His left eye twitches.

He's far less restrained than I am. Hasn't had practice with it.

When you have an abusive father, you become an expert at playing his sick mind games.

I've been too lenient on Topher, I realize. He doesn't respect me. I assume he never will.

I dare him to say something. Anything.

An excuse for me to end him here and now.

Until Ophelia came along, our connection had been the closest thing I'd had to love in my life. He's my son. My blood runs in his veins.

In my world, that counts for something.

I should be protecting him. Saving him from his own self.

I had.

He's all grown up now.

Every lawyer, judge, and jury knows that adults are tried as one.

His tongue darts out to lick his bottom lip. Shoulders square.

When I give him nothing, he nods, twisting toward Camden. Whispering in his ear. Speaking so low that I can't hear what he's saying.

A grave mistake. He should know better than to turn his back on his opponent.

I slide the lock of Ophelia’s hair into my pocket. Looking straight ahead, my lips curve up.

He should know better, true.

Yet here he is, failing.

He could have my genes. Live off my money.

He’s nothing like me.

None of them are.

Tonight, Oliver will be the first to realize it.

OUR FIRST DAY of trial ended on a positive note. Obviously. I handpicked the jury myself. I own the judge who wisely threw out a few of the ADA’s objections.

There are other matters to take care of at the office. I should’ve told our driver to drop me off there after the trial.

But no.

They’ll wait for tomorrow.

I have personal matters to attend to at home, I told my assistant.

Preparing Ophelia for tonight.

I let myself into our home, dropping my keys and bag at the entrance.

This time, the silence in the house is a welcomed one. An expected one, since I was the one who called Clara on the way over here and ordered everyone to return to their quarters for the day.

The house is dimly lit, no light filtering in. In the winter, the sun sets early. It was already dark when I was driving over here.

The scents of rice and maybe—is that chicken?—carry to me. My heart beats one, two, three times for the effort Ophelia has put into cooking our dinners.

It’s completely unnecessary. I have people to do it for me. I can cook for myself.

But she insists on showing me she cares. That she loves me. And if she does it through food, I won’t deny her.

A crippling softness climbs up my throat. Spreads warmth across my face.

I’d be a fool to hold on to it.

Oliver will be here in a few hours.

I'll hug her once he's gone.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins. My vision is clearer than ever. The air filtering into my lungs is fresh. Clean. I taste blood on my tongue.

I need that.

I need her.

Ophelia waits for me in the living room. She's tucked under a gray throw blanket on the couch, reading a book. The sight of her chain draping to the floor gets my cock hard.

"Sonnet."

"James, hi." She places the book on the end table next to her.

Using one hand. She's been reading one-handedly too.

The other one rests underneath the blanket. Hidden.

A trap.

I'm proud. I'm furious.

She's trying so hard.

My jaw tics. My chest is hot.

Loving a person is a motherfucking disease. Anyone else could've died at my feet, and I wouldn't have lost sleep over it. I would've stepped right over their corpse. Called Clara to clean up the mess.

Sure, I hate what our family has put women through over the years. I've risked my life to save theirs. But they were merely tasks I had to cross off my list.

Ophelia, though.

I need her alive. Being obvious could end up with her dead.

"Clara said you'd be back early. I just didn't think you'd be here *this* early." Her smile is tentative. "Hungry?"

Hungry, or are we practicing? That's she's really asking.

"What's for dinner?" I play her game, shrugging off my jacket. It goes on the nearest armchair, folded neatly.

The cuffs of my shirt slip through the loops. I roll the sleeves up my forearms, and Ophelia's eyes are drawn to the movement. For a moment. They're back on my face the next, dark and alert.

"Rice." Adorable. She must've burned the protein.

I fight back a smile. This isn't the time to admire the blush creeping up her cheeks.

She opens her arm to the side. Again, *one* arm. "Missed me?"

“Painfully so.”

It’s the truth. I thought about her throughout the trial. Through traffic. While my son was planning to kill me. I thought of her beneath me. At my side. On top of me.

Laughing. Moaning. Cursing me.

Cutting me. The wound on my arm has healed over the last two weeks. I have fresh, smaller ones across my back where she got me during our training. Bruises too.

Ophelia has bite marks and welts on her ass.

She knows the risks without me having to do worse. I don’t want to cause her actual harm. Anything that doesn’t have to do with sex is strictly off the table. She can hurt me, not the other way around.

My version of love isn’t conventional.

Then again, Ophelia isn’t a conventional woman. Tonight, though, Oliver will be led to believe that she is. That she’s disposable.

The cadence of my heart is furious. I’m sure she can hear it.

Casually, I stroll over to her. I’m dying to lean over and kiss her. Taste her. Sink my teeth into her plump bottom lip. I go behind the couch instead.

“You?” Placing one hand on her shoulder, I ground her. Trick her into thinking I’m falling for her act.

She pays attention to my every move. Her eyes narrow when she realizes I’m pinning her *hidden* arm down.

“Since the moment you left the house.” She’s not bullshitting me. Her tone is suspicious, nonetheless. Her body tenses, readying itself for a fight.

“That’s a good fucking girl.”

Creases line her forehead. “I didn’t do—”

In one smooth move, I hook my arm around her waist, hoisting her up in the air, pressing her back to my front.

“Fuck!” Her knife glints in the dim light.

Lightning flashes outside the window, sending white light across the room.

She throws the hand holding the knife behind her. It scratches my shoulder, slicing through my shirt. I feel a sting.

Thunder booms in the distance. The chain connected to her ankle clangs on the floor.

“You’re a good girl. So fucking ready.” I pry the knife out of her hand, carrying her small body to the arm of the couch. Shoving her face into it.

“You can do better. Tonight, you will do better.”

Ophelia growls. Thrashes. Her ass rubs into my cock and she stops when she feels how hard I am for her.

“What happens tonight?”

Slicing her T-shirt and panties off with a knife is cruel. Cutting her leggings just down to her crotch is humiliating.

It turns me on. I growl when the leggings I push roll down her body to her ankles. When I shove the torn shirt to her sides, exposing more of Ophelia to me.

Fuck, I’m ravenous for her, growing hungrier when she groans from how hard I press her cheek down on the couch.

“Tonight, you’ll fight. Really fight.” I run the blade along her bare ass. She shudders, clutching onto the cushions. I scare her, yet her gaze lets on that she’s plotting against me. “Me first. Then you’ll help me kill Oliver.”

“What?”

I lose the knife.

Crack! my hand connects to her ass.

That first pained cry.

Always the sweetest.

There’ll be plenty more where that one came from.

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34

OPHELIA

Cooking for James is super easy. Really.

I do my best. He eats it. End of story.

Catching him unprepared? Not so much.

Not at all.

When he walked in, I could tell his gaze flickered to where my hand rested under the blanket. The one that clutched the knife.

A moment. A short second. Recognition didn't flash across his face. He cut his gaze back to mine just as fast.

I should've realized he had it figured out.

Nothing gets past him.

I'm paying for it now.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

My ass is on fire. Pain takes over my consciousness. His hand isn't a mere hand. It's a weapon. His spanking hurts almost as much as when he belts me.

It turns me on just as much.

Three on each side.

My body is exposed to him. I'm bent over and pressed against the couch as if I'm here for James's entertainment. For him to humiliate me. He tore my clothes off. He won't stop spanking me, making me wet for him.

"Fight me." The familiar order drags me back to him. Away from the high. From the delicious, horrible pain.

My nipples are hard, grazing the couch. The friction, enhanced by the pain, is nice.

So nice.

“Ophelia.”

“He can’t kill us.” Oliver, James said. I’m floaty, but I’m pretty sure what I’m saying is true. “Maybe me. Not you. No one can kill you.”

“Neither of us”—metal clinks, then leather. His belt whooshes as James removes it from the loops—“is going to die.”

The sting on my ass is horrible. I howl at the pain. At the pleasure only he can deliver.

“Not tonight.” *Ow!* “Or tomorrow.” *Jesus, that hurts.* “Do you hear me?”

I’m hot and aching. My nails sink into the couch. My mind is racing with ways to get myself out of this mess, to make him proud of me.

Another blow.

Rain descends on the windows. Pounding. Brutal.

Nowhere near as brutal as James.

Just the way I love it.

“Okay, okay.” Catching my breath. I have to do that. Then, I plot my next move. “We won’t die.”

I stare up at him. His harsh expression. His sharp jaw. There’s no mercy in his icy eyes.

I’m soaking for him. Desperate for him to shove his cock inside me.

Delirious with it.

“Fight.” He strikes me one last time, discarding the belt. “Me.”

Pain. It’s almost too much to bear. My vision blurs around the edges. James slides his hand to the nape of my neck, shaking me. Leaning into my face.

“Why aren’t you fighting?” His thick eyebrows lower. He thrusts his hips forward, his hard length pressed against my sensitive ass.

“Why are you doing this?” I push against the couch. Not enough. Nothing will ever be enough when I’m hurt and aroused. Nothing other than his thick cock slamming into me.

“You know this. You’re my equal now. You have to know why.”

His equal? Me?

Can’t be. I’m the woman he kidnapped. Auctioned. Bought. The woman he chains by the ankle every day before work.

Then again, I’m also the woman he’s training to be a lawyer. A murderer.

So maybe, yeah. I am his equal.

“How are you going to kill him?” My breath hitches at his low growl. “And I don’t want to hear anything about putting a bullet through his head.”

“A gun?” I haven’t seen a gun lying around this place. Doesn’t mean it’s not here. It or they.

“A gun won’t do.”

A moan escapes me. Can’t hold it in. Can’t hold back the heat pooling between my thighs.

Two thick fingers slip inside my pussy. I gasp.

“God, you’re so wet for this.” He nips at my earlobe, curling his fingers to reach that—oh, fuck—spot. “Desperate for violence. For taking down the people who wronged you. Who wrong others.”

I’m melting for him. I’m a puddle at his feet. Can’t. Think.

“Fight me.” He drags his fingers out, slamming back into me with four fingers. “Fight. Me.”

James stretches me. Pushes me onto the couch. His fingers barrel pleasure upon pleasure onto me. Over and over and over.

My toes curl, and my breath is knocked from my lungs. I come, pulsating around his fingers.

I’m close to being lost to the sensations. To James’s ravenous eyes as he takes me in.

Close.

But then I think fast, twisting my head, clamping my teeth on his chin. My foot kicks his shin. I elbow his stomach.

The quick and sudden attack finally shocks him.

I don’t let go of his chin.

“Fuck,” he growls, eyes narrowed, lust and anger flashing in them. “That’s it.”

His momentary surprise is the only leverage I’ll have in this battle. He won’t let me have another one.

I’m quick to slip from beneath him and slide over to where he tossed the knife.

My ripped leggings, ankle cuff, and chain slow me down. I get there anyway.

My hand locks around the handle of the knife.

I toe off my leggings as fast as humanly possible so I won't stumble on them.

Turn to face him and—

"Come here." James's hand is demanding around mine. He's trying to steal the knife, just as he did before. His gaze is dark. His other hand is a manacle around my throat, pinning me to the floor. He's terrifyingly gorgeous. "That's fucking better. What are you going to do about it? You're trapped. Miserable. Overpowered. I can fuck you into the floor. Mark your pretty little cunt with my cum. Your ass too. I'll have you however I want. Fight. Me."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. Adrenaline shoots through my veins. The need to prove to him that I'm worthy of him is overwhelming.

The idea of taking down Oliver, the man who thrived on Baylor's pain, that helps too.

I lift my head, biting his arm. He keeps holding on to my hand. Dips the knife another inch toward my face. I bite harder. Push back, as challenging as it is.

Twisting the knife toward his face is practically impossible.

So I do the only thing left for me to do.

While I don't want to knee him in the balls—I love them—I have to. With what little space he's left me, I do that.

"Jesus." His lips twitch, and he pins me harder into the floor.

He's busy protecting his cock, and I manage to spin the knife in his direction. Tear into his shirt, right where his collarbone is. Where I won't cause him to bleed out or hurt a vital organ, no matter how hard I strike.

"Yes, fuck." His blood drips on me. I taste him on my tongue. Moan at his feral glare. "That's"—I slice deeper, moving the knife horizontally —"what I need from you. That's my girl."

I'm drowning in his praise.

In the process, I've lost my edge over him.

I no longer need my edge.

Our class is over.

James gains control of the knife a second time, hurling it over to the other side of the living room. He sits on his knees, hooks his fingers into the collar of my shirt, and tears it right down the middle from the front this time. The ripped fabric falls to my sides.

“Let me see exactly what I paid for.” The look in his eyes as his gaze roams over my body is electric. It steals my breath away.

“Well?” I’m mindless. Boneless. His. “Was it worth it?”

“It wasn’t enough.”

Rejection locks my throat. I’m covered in his blood. Warmed by his body. I belong to him in every sense of the word.

And I wasn’t enough?

“My bid, Ophelia. My bid wasn’t enough.” The black of his irises pushes out the blue. His lips twist in a snarl. “I would’ve paid so much more for you. Would’ve liquidated every asset in my possession. Would’ve sold my organs to have you. Killed for you. I will kill for you, damn it. You matter. You take up the entire space in my damaged soul. I could be living out on the street. I could lose my job. I could lose my fucking son. Without you? I’m as good as dead.”

“I’d have come to you freely.” The confession pushes itself out of me. “Wanting you was the other reason I was going to break up with—”

James slams a hand over my mouth. His other hand works the fly of his pants.

“I couldn’t stay with him,” I say after he releases me, pushing my legs to the sides. “When I was attracted to you.”

“And?” James fists his cock, rubbing it between my lips. Over my clit. Desire makes me heady.

“Cheating. It felt like I was cheating on Topher.” I tilt my hips up. He shoves me back down, controlling me. “I don’t cheat. Even in my head.”

He makes a satisfied sound at the back of his throat. I’m amazed by how I own him too. How he’s affected by my words. My devotion.

He takes and takes from me. My consent isn’t always required for him to touch me. To pleasure me.

He calls me property. Degrades me. Gets off on humiliating me.

He’s an evil man. The worst.

I love him, nonetheless.

I have his heart in the palm of my hand.

I have to protect him from the consequences of what we’re doing.

Worst kind of thought to have right now. Or ever. It has no place here. But…

His life could’ve been easier without me in it.

Killing Topher was never a part of his plan, I think.

Gut-wrenching sadness squeezes at my heart.

Later. Later. Now, I have him here. So close. I won't turn him away. I have him.

Later.

"Mine." One word, and he shoves every thick inch of his cock inside me. Forcing the air out of my lungs. I'm so fucking full of him, my hands clinging to his shirt. "You'll always be mine. Your drenched cunt. Your beautiful heart. Mine."

"I will, always."

"All of you. Mine." His tattooed hand skims across my navel, up to my throat. His touch is as possessive as the look he's pinning me with. As his ruthless as his thrusts are. "This mouth…"

He leans in. Hand on my jaw, mouth crashing to mine. He's aggressive, groaning, grunting. Biting, sucking. His tongue swipes across mine and, oh *fuck*, he changes the angle of his body to fuck me more thoroughly. As his toned stomach rubs against my clit, I can't take it.

I'm only aware that I'm breathing because of how hard I'm screaming into his mouth. This orgasm hurts. It's explosive, ruining both of us. Putting us back together as one.

"God, you're squeezing my cock, begging me to breed you." He's like a beast, pummeling relentlessly. "But I'm not done. We're not done."

James dips two fingers into the new gash in his collarbone.

"My blood." It trickles down his fingers, painting the rose in red. The gory sight doesn't repulse me. I'm used to having his blood on me. His spit. His cum. "Your blood."

I understand what he's demanding of me without him having to spell it out. My lips part for him. Tongue darting out. I had his blood on me.

This, his two blood-coated fingers shoved into my mouth, is different. Personal.

It's devotion.

"Suck."

I do, wrapping my lips around his fingers while he fucks my mouth. Fucks my pussy thoroughly.

When he removes his hand from my mouth, I groan, mad that he's taking it from me. I hate that he's sitting on his knees.

"You'll take what I give you." James has a hand gripping beneath my thigh, hiking it up. Just when I think he can't surprise me anymore, he does.

His fingers probe into his wound again. His blood isn't meant for my mouth this time. It's for my clit. It's obscene, how he paints my pussy red. How good it feels. "My slut. My assassin. Come for me again."

"Hurts." The metallic taste is exquisite in my mouth. I lick my lips. Clench my thighs. Stare at this man that I'm madly in love with. "Hurts. Please. I can't come another time."

"Don't care." His thumb works faster. Circling my sensitive clit. He smears blood on my pussy. On his cock. We're painted in it. "I said come, and you will come for me."

"Please."

"Shut up." The pounding rain. Every flash of lightning and rumble of thunder outside the windows. Nothing compares to him, this God. "This pussy is mine. If I tell you to come"—he pinches, twists, tugs my clit —"you will. As many times as I tell you to. Your cunt will milk my cock dry. Take every drop. Be full with my babies. Because I. Said. So."

Resisting him is as impossible as living without air. As I come, pulsing around his cock, my back arches.

My soul elevates.

He releases my thigh, catching my moans with his mouth. Coming inside me, his feral growl ruins me. His violent, merciless thrusts own me.

"Sonnet," he exhales against my lips. Rocks his hips and his cum into me. "I'd have given them my right arm to have you. To own you. Everything I have. I'd have given everything. Never forget that."

I won't.

That's why my heart does that weird, painful twist in my chest like before.

I'll do everything in my power for him too. To protect him, so he'll have everything.

Even if I'm not an active part in his life anymore.

Love is about being selfless.

As devastating as that might be.

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35

OPHELIA

"Yes, I mean it. Yes. Yes. Absolutely." James paces the length of his kitchen. He's changed into a white button-down shirt and dark gray slacks after we showered together. His fresh cut is bandaged. "No one leaves the quarters, no matter what you hear outside."

His eyes are on me until he turns around and crosses over to the living room. Then he stares out the window, reconsidering what he's just said.

"Order everyone except the doctor to take sleeping pills and wear earplugs for the night."

I wouldn't say he's nervous. Excited isn't the word, either.

He's a predator anticipating his prey. His spine is straight. Feet planted firmly on the floor in a confident stance, he listens to Clara on the other line.

Watching him is nothing short of fascinating. My body heats up as I take him in. My heart flutters for him.

I'm desperate for him. I wish I could tear off this maxi, long-sleeved, white knit dress he chose for me. I want him to fuck me senseless. His babies in my womb, I want that too.

Instead, I'm standing here, shifting from one foot to the other on my white ballet flats.

What is he even doing here?

What am I?

That's easy. I love him. I want him to have the most perfect life.

Perfect would be James living his life peacefully. Being there to watch his son grow old. Taking the time to teach Topher how to treat a woman right. Explaining to him until he gets it into his thick skull that women are more than wombs or toys to play with.

James could have a grandson or daughter from Topher—many of them.

He wouldn't have been in this mess if it weren't for me.

Because there's no doubt in my mind that James would annihilate Topher.

Does he really want it, though?

Maybe not now.

But he might regret it years down the road.

When it's too late.

I love James. I have to let him go.

The rain stopped falling about an hour ago. The moon hangs high in the clear skies, with no clouds to hide it.

James continues his conversation. "Clara, the chef shouldn't worry about his job. I'm not going to fire him anytime soon."

I almost laugh. Except my heart isn't in it.

My heart is hoping for a better life for James.

I tread over toward the front door. He doesn't notice me as I tiptoe behind him. The floors don't creak.

Soon, I'm out of his earshot, darting through the dark, silent hallways.

I'm practically floating, despite the lead lining the pit of my stomach.

It has to be done.

This is a selfless act, reaching for the keys he left out here when he got home. Sure, I'm terrified of having my soul ripped in half when he falls out of love with me.

It hurts worse to imagine our future together.

His regret. His resentment over losing Topher. I won't be able to take it. I don't wish that for him.

The lock clicks easily with the proper key. I press the handle, careful to stay as silent as possible.

I hold my breath as I open the door he's left unlocked.

The cold envelops me so quickly that my breath hitches. I suck in a new one, looking down at the stairs that lead to the driveway. They're wet from the rain, white dots of sleet scattered around it. There's an overhang above the stairs, but the winds are strong. They brought the elements to us.

They whip my hair around my head.

James's voice fades as resolution settles into me.

I won't cry. Won't let my love for him stop me from doing what's right.

I'm fixing this for James.

I'll be fine. I'll survive wherever I go. I will. Knowing I made the best choice for him will be my sustenance.

"Ophelia."

Shit.

"Ophelia."

He never asks. He demands an answer.

I'll miss that.

A rogue tear slips out. Bastard.

I wipe it with the back of my hand, throwing myself into the mercy of the night. The cold freezes my bones. My breath vaporizes in the freezing cold air. My lips grow numb.

Run.

I have to run before he can catch me. Before my feet go as numb as my lips.

"Ophelia." He's closer, despite the distance I'm putting between us.

The wrought-iron fence that seem to reach the sky is up ahead. If I'm lucky, I can climb it and come down without hurting myself.

Heavy footsteps pound on the driveway behind me.

Throughout James's training, I've grown stronger. I have better stamina than I ever had in my entire life. I run, run, run, as fast and as far as I can, the harsh wind freezing me down to my bones.

He's not calling me anymore. I don't turn around for one last look. He won't weaken my resolve.

I'm saving him. Can't he see that?

Minutes—or is it seconds?—go by. Clean, cold air closes my lungs. My hair flails around me.

James is near. So near.

I hear him. I feel him.

The gates are so close now.

My fingers flex, ready to cling to them. Ready to climb.

Except I don't need to. I won't be able to.

The white glow of two headlights slices through the darkness of the night. A black Mercedes approaches.

The gates to the mansion open.

And a large arm hooks around my middle.

“Nicely played,” he whispers in my ear. “But you’re not going anywhere. You belong here. You’ll stay here. I’ve got you.”

“Let me go.” A shiver runs up my spine. “I’m doing this for you.”

Oliver’s car. It’s here, driving slowly past the gates.

“Stay with me. That’s the only thing I could ever want. Only thing I need. For you to be a good girl.” James pulls me tighter into him. Warm. Protective. Furious. “Follow my lead, Sonnet. Remember that no matter what I say or do, I have you. I’m never letting go.”

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36

JAMES

Ophelia is filthy. Dirty. A masterpiece.

Sweet too. So very sweet.

And she loves me.

She ran off to spare me suffering and pain.

Her emotions have been out in the open for days. They're there, on her face. In her voice. In her touch. Her words.

In her actions. In this little escape attempt.

She thinks she's protecting me.

I've seen this little selfless act coming from a mile away. The way her face twisted when I told her I'd kill the rest of the world if it meant that she could live.

She withdrew into herself. While I fucked her.

Now she's here, in an attempt to save my son. Our relationship.

Sweet.

Yet unnecessary.

It might sound cruel that I don't care if he lives or dies. It might go against every law of nature for a father to be willing to sacrifice his offspring.

But I don't need Topher.

I care about him. I wish he weren't my father's replica. That he weren't hell bent on taking what's mine.

Unfortunately, this is what it's come down to.

His life or Ophelia's.

It worries her that I might regret choosing hers over his.

See? She's sweet.

She also worries over nothing. I wouldn't regret killing him if it meant saving her. Ever.

"Let me go," she hisses. Adorable, how she still thinks she has any say in this.

"Shh." I grip her tighter. "I told you. I have you. We're going to play a little game, and you're going to stay here for it. You're going to stay with me for the rest of your life. This could either be your prison or your home. Makes no difference to me. Either way, you're never leaving."

I'm being as cruel as I sounded the night I visited her in the cell for the first time. When I stared into her pretty little cunt as if I were a gynecologist.

The only breathing woman I performed this check-up on.

The other one was a cadaver Dad's gynecologist supplied for me and Oliver. Oliver checked his sacrifice later. Back then, the check-ups weren't done on stage. That was Oliver's idea. He didn't want our sons to perform it, but he wanted a show.

I said I checked mine too back then. I lied.

"It's a promise and a motherfucking threat," I whisper against the shell of her ear. "One I'll follow through with."

"I'm doing this for you," she groans, talking through clenched teeth.

This again. "I know. Shh."

Oliver's car idles when he reaches us. He's on the phone, studying Ophelia and me without lowering his window. We have time until he hangs up. Two minutes, I'd say, since he was just talking to me before I buzzed him in.

Right after I hung up on Clara.

Right before I hunted Ophelia down.

"Act like that sweet captive you were in your cell." My fingers dig into her flesh. She whimpers. "Tell me you understand."

"I understand." Finally, I sense the fight leaving her body.

When she struggles now, it's all for show.

She's being so good for me.

"Oh, and Sonnet?" I slip my hand over her mouth, returning Oliver's grin with a smaller one.

Her body heat seeps into mine. I'm fighting to keep a straight face. It's all I can do to haul her over my shoulder, take her back home, and fuck her. If I do, we won't leave the room until she's pregnant.

Until we're old and gray.

Until our happily ever after.

But we need to kill our enemies first. We have to.

"Mmm?"

"Unless I specifically tell you to." She's light in my arms as I pick her up. She's kicking the air, the driver door of Oliver's car. The asshole laughs, his smile wide under the soft lights in the driveway. "Never run from me again. Never think I'll be better off without you. Ever."

Her delicate feet in the white flats slam on his car over and over again. She pushes back, knocks her head into my chin.

Ophelia's way of telling me she understands.

Oliver clicks a button to end his call. Presses another one to lower the window. "You have a girl here."

A good girl who screams into my palm. Who gets me painfully fucking hard for her.

"You brought me here so I can kill you?" He laughs as if we're sharing a joke.

I don't buy it.

He'd love nothing more than to kill me.

He's done looking over his shoulder.

So am I.

"I brought you here to start something new." Smirking doesn't come naturally to me. I keep up the act, regardless.

"Hmm. That face, I've seen her before." His repulsive eyes drag over Ophelia's body. My woman's body. I could kill him. Reach into the car and strangle him. Except then Ophelia would miss out on the fun. "Wasn't she Topher's sacrifice?"

"She was. Emphasis on past tense."

He licks his lips. Ophelia leans into me, kicking his car again.

His eyes glint. It's taking all of my restraint not to gouge them out of their sockets. "Feisty."

"Let's head inside." I put her down, curling my hand around the back of her neck. Her pulse roars beneath my fingertips. I pretend to choke her. She pretends to gasp. Fucking precious. "Drive. Wait for us at the door."

His smile wanes. “It’ll be faster if I drive you.”

“She needs to walk off her tantrum.” Degrading her in front of him grates on my nerves. It’s a necessary evil. Just like shaking her head. “I need her calm and ready to serve us.”

Her neck tenses. She knows it’s a ruse, yet the words hurt her.

That’s fine.

It’ll be worth it. She’ll see.

“Okay.” Oliver nods to himself.

Gutting him like a fish would be such a pleasure.

He drives off, and I walk Ophelia toward our home. Her skin is cold in my grasp, almost frozen.

“Serve? Seriously?” Her flats scrape along the driveway.

“Yes. Serve.” My gaze splits between her and the motherfucker we’re going to murder while I disclose the final part of the plan, letting Ophelia in on it.

“I—What?” I was nonchalant as I said these things. This must be the reason she’s mumbling. “Just like that?”

We’re closing in on the house. Oliver’s there, perched against his car, hands in his pockets. Watching us.

“Quiet, Ophelia. Make him believe I’m disciplining you. Make me believe it.”

Every feature on her beautiful face morphs, twisting with hate. Her shoulders are hunched. Eyes spitting fire.

Then she leans into me. An indiscernible movement that I only feel because I’m so close to her. Because I own her.

She’ll do as I say. Yes, she will.

Just like that.

“Topher knows about this?” Oliver waves at us. He’s changed from the suit he wore to the office into a dark pair of pants, a white dress shirt, and a tan wool pea coat.

The last clothes he’ll ever wear.

I’m aggressive as I haul Ophelia closer to me, a way to grab Oliver’s attention while I study his face. As I look for signs that Topher spoke to him.

Topher, who couldn’t have forgotten about Ophelia’s lock of hair. He avoided me on the ride home, then texted me a cryptic message about needing to talk.

He could’ve caused a scene next to Camden, his friend. Camden would’ve spilled my secret to his father.

Oliver’s expression is open. He knows nothing about what happened today.

Ophelia whimpers, “Please. No more. Can’t take it.”

Oliver’s attention on her intensifies.

While I eye him, the motherfucker is too busy imagining my woman naked to be plotting anything against us.

If he suspected anything, he wouldn’t be so lost in her. I’m thankful for the expensive bra that hides her nipples.

“Go.” His head snaps to me at my harsh tone. Curiosity flashes in his brown eyes. “Inside. Before it starts raining again.”

“James is right. We’ll continue the conversation there.” He steps closer, outstretching a hand.

About to put it on the small of her back.

Pulling her away from him is risky.

It’s an uncontrolled impulse.

“Up the stairs,” I bark, creating a diversion. “Fast. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Ophelia’s fake whimper is such a turn-on. I put aside the need to bend her over.

“After you, Oliver. Of course.”

He must be connecting the dots as he climbs the stairs and strolls into the house.

The days I’d spent alone at home. The metaphorical walls I added to keep the world out.

In a sick mind like his, the picture he must come up with is that I tortured Ophelia here. I’ve successfully led him to believe that I had my pretty little property locked against her will. Raped. Trained.

Ophelia whimpers again, and this time, it isn’t an act. It’s from my hand that’s about to snap her swan-like neck.

“I said, fast.” It’s not an apology. It’s the only thing I have.

I push her up the stairs, catching her when she slips. And in that short pause, my gaze bores into hers.

I’m fucking sorry.

Humiliation looks hot on you.

You’re such a good girl.

What actually comes out of my mouth is, “Stop embarrassing me.”

She stares at me beneath her thick lashes. Her eyes glint like a million diamonds scattered across the skies. “I’m sorry, owner.”

This girl. Her mouth. My dick is about to tear through my pants. I shake off the feeling and drag her into the house.

Oliver shrugs off his coat and hangs it in the coatroom, never taking his eyes off us. I don’t offer him small talk or an explanation, staying quiet until we’re in the living room.

Two armchairs are positioned exactly as I set them, next to the fireplace and close to each other. One for me. One for him.

Within arm’s reach.

I release Ophelia’s neck, dipping my chin. “Remember your training?”

“Yes.” Her voice is low. Hands clasped at her front.

“Is this the part where she gets down on her knees?” Oliver’s violent nature is out in the open. He’s been waiting for this opportunity for years. “It’s been a long day in the office. I could use having my dick sucked right about now.”

His fingers curl around his belt buckle.

“Stop.” *You will never, fucking ever, have what’s mine*. “I have something far better planned for you. Only the best for my oldest friend.”

“Oh, so that’s what we’re doing.” He taps his fingers on his thigh. A smirk tugs at his lips. “By all means, then. Don’t let me get in the way.”

“Thank you.” She bows her head to me, wringing her hands in distress as she turns her head to Oliver. “What would you like to drink?”

My pride in Ophelia and her convincing performance sparks a fire within me.

Oliver cocks his head. “Can she call me owner too?”

Not in this life. Not the next. “Only one man shelled out thirty million dollars for her, Oliver.”

“Technically, three quarters of that sum. But anyway. I see what you’re saying and still, you’re no fun.” He laughs. “Okay, then. Whiskey. Neat.”

“Make that two.” I gesture toward the den where I’ve been keeping the surprise for tonight. “Macallan. The one at the bottom of the wet bar. The one I don’t let you look at. Tonight, you have my permission to do it. This is a special occasion.”

His smirk deepens, and he takes a seat in front of the fire. Places an ankle over his knee.

“I’ll go get it for you.” She spins, the addictive scent of her hair attacking my senses.

I ignore the sharp pang of longing in my chest when she walks away. Instead of chasing after her, I lower myself to the seat next to Oliver. “So. What do you think?”

“I think I finally know why you’ve been hiding. The real reason.” My senses are on high alert, picking up on any change in his tone. “You’ve invited me over. With her here.”

Any elaborate explanation I might give him could potentially incriminate me.

Oliver, on the other hand, enjoys talking.

I let him, nodding.

“But you can’t control her. Not really, the way she ran off back there.”

A shrug. “She’s a feisty one.”

“Mm-hmm.” Apparently, that answer has pleased him. He leans back, adjusting the bulge in his pants. I fight the urge to cut his dick off his body and feed it to him. “I like it when they put up a fight. I never hurt them, but a little discipline every now and then is satisfying.”

“No need. She knows her place. When we share her tonight, she doesn’t have to like it. She’ll do it anyway.” My stomach roils. Bile rises in my throat. I might lose my shit by the time Ophelia shows up. “A gift for you, in exchange for my life. I could tell you suspected me, and I was done hiding.”

“Sharing it is, then.” His entire body brims with murderous energy. Worse. Predatory. “My fucking pleasure.”

“How’s Camden?” I change the subject. Fishing for more information. “Was our day in court what he’d expected?”

“That and then some.” Oliver chuckles. “He blabbered about it over dinner. Only stopped when I started talking about hunting a woman down. He’s thrilled that we get to do it together.”

Barbaric. “Yes, he mentioned that.”

“Join us? You and Topher?”

“Sure.” Hell no. “I’ll have to clear my schedule and ask Topher when he’s available.”

“Great, we’ll make—”

Small, delicate footsteps bring our conversation to an abrupt end. Ophelia patters slowly across the living room, holding two crystal tumblers

in her hands.

Effervescent. Submissive.

Mine.

“Owner.” When she kneels between my legs, my world ceases to exist.

Her dark eyes suck me in into another planet. To another life, the one we’ll have after this. We could stay here and rule the law firm together. We could disappear. Buy an island. Another mansion in a different country.

I’d fuck one baby after the other into her. I’d worship her. Just us.

Except we’re not there yet.

Yet.

“Put it over there.” I jerk my head toward the end table between Oliver and me. She does. “Go ask Oliver where he’d like to have his.”

Both he and I track her movements as she stands up and lowers herself to her knees again before him.

Only one of us knows what’s behind her submissive act.

“Mr. Morgan.” He’s wise to keep his hands to himself. He can’t help the fire in his eyes, though. “Where should I put your drink?”

“On my—”

Enough is enough. He doesn’t get to order her shit.

“On the table,” I growl. I couldn’t let him talk to her like that.

He shrugs, eye-fucking her, the bastard. It works in our favor, but goddamn it. I hate it. “Go ahead.”

She bites her lip, forcing his gaze there.

That way, he doesn’t look at her while she’s placing his drink next to mine.

He’s oblivious about where her hand goes next.

Under the skirt of her dress. Where her tight, white lace garter is.

Where the small paring knife is.

The one I sharpened for her.

The one she has in her grip.

He sees it when it’s too late.

Far too late.

“What the fuck is—” He’s swallowing the rest of that question.

The blade disappears in his throat. Ophelia buries it deep down, cutting through his skin. Viciously.

His mouth gapes. His fingers grasp the armrests. Eyes on me.

Most of my focus rests on Ophelia.

On the blood that’s trickling down the blade and onto her nails. Her hand.

Her white dress remains in pristine condition. Her lips are stretched in an unhinged grin. Her cheeks are red with how alive she is.

When I shot my father, I felt nothing but relief. There was nothing personal about pulling the trigger and blowing his head off.

His abuse was a thing of the past by the time I turned twenty-two.

I just wanted him dead and out of the way.

For Ophelia, this is personal.

This is for Baylor, a girl she hardly knew. For Oliver’s sacrifice twenty-two years ago. For Camden’s mom.

We’re a lot alike, her and I. Much more than I’d care to admit.

Except she has a heart. I don’t.

“James.” The color has drained from Oliver’s face. “Help.”

He’s still frozen in place. There’s no need for me to come to Ophelia’s rescue.

She has it covered.

I’m so fucking proud of her that I could kneel behind her and fuck her like that. While she’s stabbing Oliver.

“You’re a bad man,” she hisses, and his eyes cut to her. My entire body is on high alert. “A fucking rapist. Worse than that.”

At the sound of her voice, he jolts. His hands are in the air, fingers curling. Reaching for my Ophelia’s neck. “And you’re a dead girl.”

“No.” I get up at the exact moment she yanks the knife out of his throat.

Blood comes flying out of the gash. It splashes onto her face and her neck. Soaking the front of her dress. So much of it.

Her eyes are wide open for this. She doesn’t cower from the onslaught of blood. From having it cover her.

She knew she hit his jugular. My good girl listened carefully when I taught her about human anatomy.

He’ll bleed out in a matter of minutes.

But he’s still coming for her. His large hands are on her neck.

Mine.

I grab him by his hair, tug, and slam his head on the back of the chair.

“James.” My name is garbled. Blood sputters on his lips. On his shirt. His body spasms uncontrollably. “I w-w-was right.”

“Fuck you.”

Ophelia pushes the handle of the knife into my free hand. I shoot her a glance. Relish the adoring look in her eyes. The fact that she's there, on her knees.

For me.

My feral queen.

The woman who's both the end and the beginning of me.

I return to the man who's bleeding out on my chair. His life is about to be snuffed out of his eyes any minute now.

"This is all on you." My last words to him. "I asked you to end this tradition. You wouldn't. Instead, you had me stalked. You waited for the opportunity to get me for breaking the rules."

"Camden," he whispers. "Don't hurt him."

Like me, his heart beats for one person and only them. In his case, it's his son.

"Owner." Ophelia's hand latches on to my thigh, her voice pure seduction.

Fuck, I'm throbbing. I want her.

I'm drenched with my thirst for blood, violence, and sex.

"Your son will be handled accordingly." A flash of life sparks across Oliver's face. His hand rises in a futile attempt to grab my wrist. "Oh, and the rules you were talking about? The fucking tradition?"

Oliver struggles to stay alive. Presses his free hand to the gaping wound.

"My king." Ophelia, who's too turned on to stay in place, cups my painful erection. Squeezes.

I groan.

"Fuck the tradition. Fuck the rules." I jab the knife into his right eye, then I expose his throat to me, stabbing every available area that his hand doesn't cover. "I'm making my own rules. This is my world now. You're done being a part of it."

His last breath is pathetic. A mixture of blood and misery.

Who cares about his last breath.

I throw the knife somewhere. Anywhere.

"Sonnet." I'm on my knees in seconds, shoving her to the floor until she's lying on her back. I scrunch her dress up her thighs. "You did so well." I kiss her, sliding my fingers under her panties. "My good girl. My slut. God, you're good. You're soaked."

“Ruined.” She nods, looking at me as if I were her God.

For as long as I’m alive, I will be.

I go down her body, rip her panties off, and eat her out. I don’t stop when she comes. When she cries. When she both moans my name and curses me over and over again.

I stop when I decide it’s the right time.

After her third orgasm, I fuck her into the floor. I choke her and tell her she’s a good fucking girl.

I pump my seed into her while she comes.

While Oliver is there, slumped in the chair, lifeless.

Victory tastes sweet on my tongue.

Being deep inside Ophelia’s cunt is far sweeter.

“I’m never letting go,” I whisper, trailing hot kisses along her neck, cleaning his blood off her. “You’re mine, Ophelia. Mine.”

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37

OPHELIA

A month ago, I had no direction in life.

I knew I had to do something with myself. Be something. Become someone.

Have a family someday in the future.

Maybe find a boyfriend who didn't shut me out and refuse to fuck me.

No, that wasn't what I was really after.

Settling for scraps and selling myself short. That's what I was all about.

I fought so hard to get the old Topher back because once upon a time, he'd made me believe that he'd seen the real me. He'd lied to me. Tricked me into believing that he liked what was underneath.

He sold me a lie.

For a brief moment in time, I thought I could love him.

I never did.

For many reasons.

The main one being that I never belonged to him in the first place.

I realize it now as I'm standing next to James in the elevator that takes us to his office. The man I love. The man I breathe for.

The man I'll kill for.

Killed for.

As if sensing my thoughts, James glances at me. His cold eyes send chills down my spine. They remind me of the icy night yesterday when we killed Oliver.

After we covered his floor with a tarp and chopped Oliver to pieces, he dressed me in warm clothes. Together, we went to the backyard. We set up a bonfire and turned flesh into ashes. Where the ground accepted Oliver's bones and his phone, once I deleted his GPS history and smashed the stupid device.

Then James, my hero, went to Oliver's Mercedes and deleted it from there too. He doused it in gasoline, set it on fire. The armchair and our clothes too. Not before James memorized every blood spatter on my face, my neck, my dress. He licked his lips.

We buried all the burnt evidence before we went to bed.

"Miss Monroe." He cocks an eyebrow.

Right.

We're headed to work. I'm dressed for my first day at the law firm. Black skirt, a matching jacket and a cream-colored silk blouse beneath. Sheathed in a black pea coat drapes over my body. My legs are covered in black tights.

It's nothing compared to James's. My God. He's handsome at home, with his scruff and lounge clothes. He's just as breathtaking in a black wool coat, a dark gray suit, a stark white shirt, and his shaved jaw.

The sheer power of him. Scary and formidable and fuck, I'm wet between my thighs.

"Ophelia."

I clasp my hands together in front of me, interlacing my fingers. It's not a good look to shudder on your first day in a new workplace.

My old workplace, Laurier's, knows I'm not coming back. James had someone call to pass along my formal resignation while I was in the cell. I also found out that he passed a message to Sage the night he bought me. It was time for her to find a new roommate.

I don't think she would've gone up against him. I don't blame her for it. She did her best without putting her life at risk. Fucking with James isn't wise; I'm well aware of that now.

He warned her against it, regardless. My man who leaves nothing to chance.

"Yes?"

"Remember what we talked about back home?"

It's just the two of us in the elevator. The higher we go, the more people have filtered out. We're about to reach the top floor. His employees should

be swarming the office.. Usually, he comes in early, before anyone else.

Today, he's making an entrance.

We're making an entrance.

Holy shit. I really need to stop shivering.

"I remember." Two floors to go. My heart is racing. "Chin high. Shoulders back. No one belongs here more than I do."

"And?" His gaze is an iceberg, yet I see the warmth in it. He's bathing me in affection. "What else?"

"Properties aren't allowed to leave their owner's side," I whisper. Heat scalds my cheeks. I'll never tire of how hot it is when he degrades me. "Wherever my owner goes, I follow."

He makes a low sound of approval in the back of his throat. Rests his tattooed hand on my chignon that's twisted at my nape.

One second and his touch is gone.

Three.

Two.

One.

The elevator door slides open.

Light floods in from the floor-to-ceiling windows, the sun shining through the thick December clouds. There are so many people here. I never imagined it'd be so crowded.

They're on their phones. Men and women in suits pace the halls.

Some sit in meetings inside glass offices.

One of the men is right here, leaning over the front desk, talking to the auburn-haired receptionist.

Terror clutches at my chest, numbing me, and it has nothing to do with any of them.

When Topher finds out I'm here, there'll be hell to pay. He'll shout. Throw a tantrum like he did when he showed up at our home. Everyone on the floor will whisper and point fingers at me.

There's no telling what poison he'll feed them before James kills him.

Then I remember why I'm here before Camden and Topher are taken care of.

A show of power. Of James's power.

He wants me here. He thinks I belong, truly. He wants them to know that if anyone takes Topher's side, they'll be fired on the spot.

It's essential that I remember that.

One day, I'll be an equal partner at James's side. Or we'll shut this place down for good and move away.

Whatever we decide, that's where I'll be. That's my destiny.

Our destiny.

I won't cower or freak out about what anyone has to say about me.

Chin up. Shoulders pulled back.

No one belongs here more than I do.

"After you, Miss Monroe."

I feel the ghost of his hand on the small of my back. It's then that I forget about the nerves and how my stomach swoops and my heart gallops.

The first step is always the hardest one. I learned that in every new foster home I walked into.

The uncertainty is usually worse than whatever's out there.

Here we go.

My heel hits the slate-gray granite floor. The other one. I have this.

James is right by my side. I don't need to see him to know he's there. His dominant energy is an unavoidable force.

The receptionist, in a deep blue blazer, twists her head to look at him as we approach. The man who's been talking to her blanches and disappears without a word.

"Mr. Hawthorne." Her green eyes are set on him, her expression professional. She doesn't have a crush on my man. But she is stunning. Jealousy heats my neck. "Good morning. How are you today?"

"Good. Elodie." The way he says her name isn't warm or inviting. It isn't cold like he says mine sometimes. His tone is flat, and I like it. I like it a lot. "This is Ophelia—" He pauses, and my pulse skyrockets at the implication. How he almost called me Ophelia Hawthorne. Soon, I'll be his wife. "Monroe. Miss Monroe will be working closely with me starting today."

"I'm Elodie. Welcome to Hawthorne Morgan, Miss Monroe." Her smile is brilliant, her teeth as perfect as everything about her. She doesn't ask in what capacity I'll be working here, doesn't look at me funny. No. She offers me her hand, and I shake it. "You've come to the right place. I wish you the best of luck here."

"Thank you." My hand is at my side again. "Great meeting you too. I'm excited."

“Should I show her to HR and start her processing?” Elodie is polite, her gaze switching between us. We’re going to get along, she and I. “I can call Winslet to cover for me for a little while. She has some free time.”

Oliver’s assistant. James made me memorize everyone’s names. Everyone who matters.

“Free time?” His eyebrows lower. We discussed faking concern when we arrived. I had no idea he’d sell it so well. “Oliver hasn’t arrived yet? Is he due in court today?”

“I don’t believe he is.” Elodie looks at me pointedly before turning to James. He nods. She can talk about office matters around me. “Winslet said he stayed here after she left the night before. We aren’t sure where he went after that. His calendar is empty.”

A victorious smile threatens to tear my face. I press my lips, mimicking James’s frown.

“Since then, nothing,” she continues. “His phone has been turned off. Camden hasn’t seen him at their home, either. He said his father might have some, um…private affairs. He’ll try his phone or drop by his place again later.”

“I’ll try him too once I get to the office.” James beckons me to walk ahead of him. I take a step forward. Stop. Wait for him to finish his conversation. “If you hear from him, please let me know. And don’t worry about HR. I’ll show Miss Monroe the office and to the HR processing.”

“Of course, Mr. Hawthorne.” Her voice is already fading as James and I head over toward his corner office.

Heads turn our way from the hallway. The coffee station. The cubicles and offices.

At that, I let a small smile slip. Everyone’s watching. Everyone sees me at his side. They can tell I mean something to him.

I don’t care about prestige or making a name for myself.

I care about being his.

This is as close as I get to licking him in front of the entire world and calling him mine.

Maybe one day.

It seems like I’m the only one who notices them. Not James. No one is worth his time. He guides me forward, just the two of us. His gait is long and confident. My heels clink louder the quieter it becomes.

“The open door to the corner office,” he says in a low voice, meant for me and no one else. “That’s me.”

“Don’t you mean *us*?”

He gives me a side-eye. It’s both a *yes* and a *you’re being a brat. I’ll spank you for it later*.

We’re twenty feet from reaching his office. Andrea, his brunette assistant, sits up straighter. Ready to welcome us. He hasn’t told anyone that I would be here. Maybe she thinks I’m a client. Probably.

I can’t wait for him to introduce me as his…

Employee.

We’re still walking when the joy bubbling in my stomach is overshadowed by a strange feeling. We’re being watched. Maybe by Topher.

Except he isn’t here. I don’t see him. I sure don’t hear him.

It’s just the nerves creeping up on me again. Has to be it. My bladder is acting up too. I didn’t need to go a second ago. I do now.

Yeah, definitely my nerves going wild.

After James introduces me to his assistant, I ask him where I can find the bathroom.

“Hold on.” He hands his bag to Andrea, who’s quick to grab it. Same with my coat after he helps me out of it. “I’ll walk you there.”

“No, no, please.” My neck heats again. I’m his property, not his child, for Christ’s sake. But since he’s giving me that narrowed look of *remember who you belong to*, I add, “I’ll be back in a second. Really.”

Andrea says nothing at our exchange. James hovers. His tattooed hand clenches at his side, out of her sight.

“Straight down the hall and to the right,” he grits out. “Hurry up. We have a lot of meetings and material to catch up on.”

“Of course, Mr. Hawthorne.”

His jaw tics. He has to be hard. It must hurt.

Too bad I can’t drop to my knees and help him…

Right this minute.

“Go.” My salacious mood must be evident because he dismisses me, the flick of his wrist humiliating and hot. “Where’s Topher?” I hear him asking Andrea.

“In his office, buried in work. That’s what he said. He also asked to see you.”

“I’ll go through my emails and call him. If he comes over here, let him in.”

“Will do.”

“About Miss Monroe’s papers…”

Their conversation continues out of earshot while I head toward the restroom. The ominous feeling from before lingers, and I keep chalking it up to nerves. Excitement of the unknown.

Fear? No. No fear over here. Not an ounce of it. I cross the hallway, tilting my head into this associate’s office. Nodding at and greeting a gray-haired woman who’s gripping a bunch of folders and passing by me.

I act like I belong here because I do. I’m James’s. I’ve been studying hard. I’ll study even harder at school—if that’s where our plans lead us.

I have and will earn my place here.

It’ll be okay.

No fear.

The restroom is the cleanest I’ve ever seen. And quiet. Empty. I do my business. Flush. Wash my hands.

About to reach for a paper towel.

“Hello, sacrifice.”

Frozen. I am so frozen in place that I can’t breathe.

Where’s my bravery when I need it?

Too late. Topher flips the lock on the restroom door. My ex-boyfriend stalks toward me until he’s standing behind me. Staring at me through our reflection in the mirror.

James would be outraged if he were here. At Topher’s audacity to cage me in between his arms.

He’ll be furious at me too for letting Topher get this close. I just gave my opponent a huge advantage. An absurd amount of it.

I’m sure that’d infuriate him more than anything. My failure.

The thought of his deep scowl and disapproval is a slap in the face. I give myself a mental shake, turning in what little space Topher has left between us.

My hands are flat on his chest, and I push him.

James’s training sessions have made me stronger.

Problem is, Topher’s angry. Real angry. His teeth gnash. His eyes have flames burning in them. It’s nothing like his father’s wrath.

Topher’s anger is unleashed. Uncontrolled. Juvenile in every sense of the word.

Another shove. He hardly budges.

“Get the fuck off me.”

“How about no.” He lowers his face to mine. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell me why you’re here. Why you’ve been fucking my dad.” He comes closer, his nose almost touching mine. I have the strongest urge to bite it off his stupid face. “Why he’s been hiding it. Tell me everything right the fuck now, Ophelia.”

As I stare him dead in the eye, I run through my options.

Screaming would have someone running to help me in a matter of seconds. James, even. He’d break through the door. We’d make a scene. A really, really terrible first impression.

Sticking my heel in Topher’s foot or kneeing him in the balls are good alternatives.

Thing is, it won’t get me the information I need.

Like what if he knows more than he lets on.

What if Oliver told him where he had gone the night before?

Since he isn’t half as calculating as his dad, I poke the dumb bear.

Dumb bears are prone to slip-ups.

James taught me that too.

“Hmm, let’s see.” I smirk. He twists his lips in a snarl. “First, he actually *fucks* me.”

As I predicted, emphasizing that word gets him even more worked up. Topher growls, his eye twitching. “You know I couldn’t.”

“James does it really well. Like really, reallyyyy well.” I pretend he said nothing. His words are as inconsequential as he is. “Your dad takes me in every hole, Topher. I can’t believe I thought you and I could ever be together. He’s so big. Some days, it’s impossible to walk straight after his fat cock splits me in half. I can’t imagine anyone could compare.”

“Whore.” His fingers snap on my chin in a punishing grip.

That’s it. The first piece of information I suck out of him.

No grinding his hips to mine. No tearing my clothes.

He’s terrified of James.

If Oliver told him he’d come to visit us last night, Topher wouldn’t have been scared. He would’ve known he had leverage on James.

He would’ve assaulted me.

Even with James's connections and incriminating photos, an accusation like murdering Oliver Morgan could ruin his reputation. Could send him to prison.

But no. Topher's cock isn't anywhere near me.

I laugh at him. "Too afraid to show me how small you are? Or…" I laugh again, the sound derisive. Topher's fingers bite harder into my chin. "You're afraid of Daddy? Of taking his whore? Of course you are. He'll fuck you up if your miserable penis comes anywhere near me."

"I could kill him. I'm entitled to. Then I'd ruin you, whore."

"He's so far out of your league, it's laughable." Topher hates it when I laugh, apparently. So I keep at it. "He'll ruin you before you have a chance to say *Daddy, you hurt my feelings*." The last part I say in a baby voice, pouting at the end of the sentence.

"Bitch." His fingers will leave marks at this rate. I won't allow that. Grabbing him by the throat, I squeeze. He loosens his hold on me, marginally. "Fucking cunt. I'm not fighting him alone."

God, he's easy.

"You and what army?" I imagine James's disappointment at me morphing into pride for being able to extract information while I'm being cornered like this.

"Who do you think told me that I had the right to kill Dad if he ever stepped out of line?"

"Who?" *Go on, loser, speak.*

"You're a dumb one. You've been up there for weeks and have been nothing but a whore to him." A few extra seconds. After that, I'll fuck him up. "Then he brought you here. Parading his whore. And you're still clueless. Just like you were the whole time we were dating. An idiot."

"Care to enlighten me, then?" It's a hardship, pretending that I'm hurt rather than showing him what I really think of his loser ass. I drop my hand from his throat to convince him that he's gotten to me. "Since you're the alpha male and all. Should I open my legs to you?"

"Nah. I'm over you. Maybe the other two would appreciate the offer."

Other two.

Camden and…

Oliver.

The pile of ashes in our backyard.

Fuck, I can't laugh now. Have to rein it in.

That’s it. I don’t need any more information from him.

I raise my foot without Topher noticing, being sneaky about it. Here it is, another second and I’ll impale his expensive dress shoe, down to the bone.

“I’d be doing you a favor.” His mocking voice stops me in my tracks. “He’s using you. Has he told you you’re nothing but a womb? A vessel to put a baby in, then dispose of?”

I know James wouldn’t do that. I know he loves me as much as a man like him is capable of loving another person. He’s given me every bit of him. Whatever’s there, beneath his chest, it’s mine.

Topher wounds me regardless, as he reminds me of James’s words from a lifetime ago. The memories debilitate me. The memories are a punch to the throat. A kick to the gut.

He didn’t want to do it to Topher’s mom, and yet he sort of did it anyway.

That’s what the men in these families do.

Who’s to say he won’t change his mind about me?

“Aww, look at you. Poor little girl.” Despite his derisive tone, the vein in Topher’s temple throbs. He’s just as pissed as I am. “He forgot to mention that, I see.”

I remain silent while my body slowly wakes up from the shock.

“If you beg nicely, I might let you live.” In my periphery, I notice both his hands have slammed on the sink. He better not touch me again. I’m this close to killing him as it is. “Don’t worry. Even if you’re carrying his baby, we’ll take care of that.”

“Take care of that?” The words are venom on my tongue.

“In the unfortunate case that you are pregnant, we’ll have you abort whatever freak he might’ve put into you and—”

That does it. That fucking does it.

I have no idea whether I’m pregnant or not. I’m pretty sure I’m not.

Still. *Still*.

No one touches my would-be baby. As imaginary as they might be.

My heel sinks into the top of Topher’s shoe. My nails dig into his neck.

He cries out, the loser, even though my heel hasn’t torn through his shoe.

Yet.

“Whore.” He staggers back. His face is twisted. I straighten to my full height, taking a step toward him, my hand firm on his throat. “You’re dead. I’ll kill you.”

“You won’t, you loser. You failure.” The emotional pain gets pushed aside. In its place, my survival mechanism kick in. “You’re forgetting you’ll have to go through your father first. A much better kisser. A better fuck than you ever could’ve been. Smarter, sharper, kinder. A better man in every sense of the word.”

Topher opens his pathetic mouth to speak.

I stab his chest with a finger. I’m nowhere near done. “He has bigger brains and an even bigger cock, no doubt about it. He’s everything you’ll never be. So thank you for using me, Topher. For bringing us together. Being your stepmom isn’t the highlight of my life, but I’ll do it for James. Nothing will please me more than putting you in your place. I’ll ground you for fucking life.”

I laugh. It sounds a little unhinged. Topher’s mouth opens again.

“Ophelia.” One violent hand slams on the door, silencing both of us. “Let me in, or I’m breaking down the door.”

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38

JAMES

Ophelia believes that my stalking days have ended once she became mine. Once the cell door closed in her face.

Once I transferred thirty million dollars to my own organization.

Wrong. I watch her closely when we're together.

Nothing gets past me when it comes to her.

Including how long it takes her to get out of the bathroom.

By the time Andrea and I finished reviewing my notes, Ophelia should've been back.

The hallway was full of people who weren't her.

Gray people in their bland clothes. Dull and boring.

I couldn't find my dark queen anywhere. Couldn't so much as sense her.

She. Should've. Been. Back.

Someone was holding her up.

Topher.

Having Andrea call his office to verify that he wasn't there was pointless. Every second I wasted, was another one I wasn't helping Ophelia.

She was strong and fierce.

But.

That goddamn *but*. It turned me into a destructive monster.

I could barge in. Except I'm a curious, jealous bastard who prefers to listen.

"…your father. A much better kisser. A better fuck than you could've ever been. Smarter, sharper, kinder. A better man in every sense of the

word.”

Her words make the throbbing in my pants intolerable. Her determination. The fire in her.

She’s humiliating him.

I’m not about to sit this one out, to leave her alone with him.

I push down the handle and find the door locked.

He locked it.

I don’t think. Don’t breathe.

“Ophelia.” One hand slams on the door. “Let me in, or I’m breaking down the door.”

The only reason I’m not actually doing it is our location.

Damn you, Topher.

Twenty-one years ago, I watched him take his first breath. I meant to keep him. I meant to be the man my father never could be.

But I’ve failed him. He’s failed me as well.

Maybe he’ll have better luck joining his grandfather in hell.

“Ophelia, so help me, I will not ask you twice.”

The door flies open. My woman, my everything, is standing there. Tall and proud.

With red finger marks on her chin.

“I’m here. I’m fine.”

“The hell you are.” I grab her by the arm, shoving her behind me. Topher could be carrying a gun. Hiding a knife.

He saw the lock of her hair yesterday. He might’ve been planning to kill me.

I don’t care.

I’ll destroy him for this.

“Let’s get out of here.” She sounds confident, unharmed. Fuck that.

The motherfucking finger marks on her chin.

I step into the restroom, my free hand flipping the lock blindly.

“James, I mean it.” Her touch on my back doesn’t have its usual calming effect on me. The opposite. “You have a meeting in ten minutes.”

They can wait. The whole world can go up in flames. Ophelia was hurt. By my son. Who’s standing there, returning my furious gaze.

As if he has the right.

“Her chin.” I keep her close behind me, squeezing her hand as I move in on him. “You did this to her.”

“I’ll do much worse once you’re dead,” he spits out.

His empty threat is laughable. More so when he takes a cowardly step back toward the wall. Meaning he isn’t carrying anything that could do actual damage.

He had no intention of attacking me here.

“You’ll have to kill me first,” I warn. I skip the part where one of his accomplices is already dead. None of his business. “Son.”

Rage paints his face purple. His hand is on his pants pocket, over the outline of a rectangle—his phone.

“Call Camden. Go ahead, try killing me here. Now.” I jerk my chin back, gesturing to the office. My hand clasps tighter around Ophelia. “See how fast everyone jumps ship. They’re loyal to Oliver and me first. Worse still, they’ll take photos. Videos. You won’t be able to blackmail your way out of killing me here for no reason.”

He considers this. I let him, reveling at how rattled he looks.

“This isn’t over, James.” That’s the first time he’s called me by my name. He won’t get to do that for much longer. “You’ll pay for this. I swear you will.”

Ophelia’s presence is hot on my back.

She hates him for the things he says. Infuriated by the idea of anyone hurting me.

I can’t stand the thought of anyone touching her just as bad if not worse.

It jars me how feral, how out of control I am when it comes to her.

Nothing to do but accept it, I guess. Worth it.

All of it.

Then…a foreboding feeling creeps up my spine.

Despite Ophelia’s show of strength, something’s up with her. I need her out of here. I need to hear what kind of filth he’s poisoned her mind with.

“Good luck taking me down.” I take a step forward. He shrinks into the wall. Jesus, I raised him fucking better. “Back to work. Don’t you dare go anywhere near Ophelia again, or it’ll be the last thing you do.”

I’m being a prick, pretending like his death sentence hasn’t already been given.

I haven’t stayed alive and thriving this long by playing by the rules.

“Get out.” I gesture to the door, guiding Ophelia back to the sink, still behind me. Still safe.

“Fine.” Topher rolls his eyes and storms out.

Once the door closes behind him, I turn to Ophelia. She gazes up at me, her wide dark eyes framed by dark eyeshadow and thick mascara. Exceptional. And alive.

Without the damn red marks that have faded while I put Topher in his place.

Focusing on work with her here will be challenging. Focusing on anything now is hell. I have to be inside her. Have to make her feel better.

After I understand what the hell is wrong with her. In my office. Not in the restroom, for crying out loud.

I place my hand on the small of her back and open the door for her. “After you.”

She nods. Quiet as she slides past me.

My pulse thunders between my ears.

I’ll fix this. I’ll always fix everything for her.

The walk to my office is uneventful. When we reach it, Andrea is busy on a phone call. Hardly notices us.

She won’t even hear or see us soon when we go into my office, where my soundproof walls will swallow up Ophelia’s screams.

I put my lips to Ophelia’s ear. “Go inside and wait for me behind my desk,” then, “Andrea.”

“Hold on, please,” she tells the person on the other line, clicking the hold button. “Yes, Mr. Hawthorne?”

“Miss Monroe”—it infuriates me that I can’t call her Mrs. Hawthorne yet—“and I have a business meeting that I can’t put off. Clear my schedule for the next hour and hold my calls.”

“Will do.” She jots my instructions on a piece of paper on her desk.

Suppressing a wicked smirk, I add, “Unless it’s Oliver. I’m starting to worry about him.”

Her expression clouds, brow furrowing. “Do you think we should involve the police? I can do that while you two are in your meeting.”

“Hmm.” I pause. I’m dying to see what’s bothering Ophelia. Fuck the fear out of her. But my performance has to be flawless. I have to appear as though I’m considering this. “Give it until the end of the day. We don’t want police officers barging in on him in an intimate moment.”

Oliver’s orgies are no secret around the office. His reputation serves me well today.

“Will do.” Her cheeks don’t flush. Professional to the bone.

I’m inside the office. Door closed. Lock flipped.

Ophelia waits for me behind the desk like she was told.

Manhattan’s view pales in comparison to my dark angel. Her expression is defiant. Lips pinched, chin up.

She needs me. The man to put her mind at ease.

The one to put her in her place.

“Bend over the desk,” I say, my tone bored.

I’ll never get over our games.

I’ll never stop getting hard from the shocked, humiliated expression on her face.

“We’re at work.” She sounds self-assured. Her hands are shaking, though. A slight tremble that gives her away. “We should be, you know, working.”

“We will.” Every step I take toward her has her lips pinching tighter. “After you bend the fuck over.”

“Why?” Flexing her fingers gets the shivers to stop. She pushes them to her hips. “I’m not ovulating”—she spits out the word—“today. You should save your sperm.”

I hope she’s ready for her punishment.

For talking back. For doubting me.

For letting an outsider put these ideas in her head.

Most of all, because she needs the pain to remember who she is.

I’ll always be there to attend to her needs.

I round the desk, standing behind her. I slide a hand beneath her chignon to curl my fingers around the nape of her neck. “I see what’s going on here.”

“Stop it,” she hisses.

“Like hell.” She puts up a fight when I bend her over the desk, cheek mashed into the expensive dark wood.

“You’re a bastard.” Her insult is swallowed up by the buzzing in my ears. By the sense of mission. By the determination that burns through me.

The need to slaughter Topher doesn’t help, either.

“James.”

“Shut up.” I pull her arms behind her back. My hand is a manacle around her wrists.

“I’ll scream.”

“Try that. Please do.”

She’s pliant beneath me, lets me thrust her hips into the desk, pin her there with my legs while I remove my tie.

“Scream, cry. I don’t give a fuck. I won’t stop punishing you. The entire office could come walking through this door. I’ll still have you like this. Bound. At my motherfucking mercy.” My tie is around her wrists, locking them together. My cock jerks at how beautiful she looks. “Until you remember who you belong to.”

“So you’re not denying it?” She raises her face from the desk. I shove it back down.

I wait to see what other bullshit I’m dealing with here. What I need to take care of as her owner.

“You won’t keep me after we’re done.” Her huff is full of agony. Her huff deepens my hatred for Topher. “You’re using me for sex. To fuck babies into me. Have a new family. Then you’ll send me away.”

No sobs from my woman. The hurt, however, is evident in her voice. In her desperation to hear how much I love her.

I’m trying to stay calm. Fuck, am I trying.

She’s gorgeous. She needs me to tell her once and for all that, no, I won’t send her away once she gives me a child. That, yes, she’s my entire universe.

She won’t listen to my words, though. Actions, that’s what she needs right now. I rock my hips into her, furious at the layers of clothes separating us. I keep at it anyway, hurting her as I push her to the desk.

“I hate you! Why won’t you say anything?”

She loves me. Loves what I’m doing to her. Poor thing can’t help it.

“Your accusations, Sonnet.” Another thrust. She moans when her clit bangs into the desk. “Have a new family. Throw you out. Why would I do that?”

“You’ll have a new bloodline.” The words are breathy. “Kids who won’t want to kill you. I won’t be there, so you’ll have one less thing to worry about.”

“That’s a plus, sure.”

She’s distracted by my taunting, glaring into my eyes while I remove my belt.

“That’s why you’ll get rid of me.”

Her hair is a mess. The makeup on her hidden eye has to be smudged. A couple of phone calls to professionals will take care of that after we’re

done.

After she learns a lesson she seems to have forgotten.

She. Is. Mine.

“You’re confused, Miss Monroe.” Temporarily, if I have anything to do with it. Which I do. I lift her head by her chignon. Slip the belt between her and the desk. Put her head back, her mouth on the leather. “That’s understandable. Today is your first time out of the house in a very long time. It could get overwhelming.”

“Hate”—she lets me position the belt better, to open her mouth so it’ll fit there—“you.”

Her lipstick smears on my belt.

“I brought you to my office for a reason.” I tug on her gag, buckling it behind her head. She looks ethereal. An animal. My prey, wriggling to get out from under me. She looks like mine. “Let everyone see you. Let them know you’re here to stay. That I don’t give a shit about what anyone says. You belong to me.”

That slows her harsh breaths. I grind my hips to her, reaching for a drawer in my desk. Taking out a metal ruler and shutting the drawer with more force than necessary.

“That’s why Topher fucked with your head.” I scrunch her skirt up her thighs.

My free hand shoves her tights down her legs. Then I trace the curve of her round ass, squeezing the soft flesh.

So sexy. So bare of welts and red marks. I’ve been neglecting her, and it’s my fault. Heat spreads through my body as I slip a finger under her black thong, lifting it, and snapping it back on her crack.

Fuck, that’s satisfying. Her pain. Her surprised cry.

I want all of her. I’ll have it.

“He knows he can’t undermine me. That he can’t have you.” Repeating the motion makes her lose her mind. She pushes her hips to me, desperate for friction while she’s growling and dripping for me. “He knows you’re mine. That I’ll never let you go. That I’ll kill anyone who tries to take you.”

My office is charged with our love and need for one another. They’re so strong that it’s getting into my head. Even more so once I see that first drop of spit trickling from Ophelia’s mouth.

This desk is wrong. This isn’t where I need her to be. She’s weightless in my arms as I manhandle her over me, so her stomach rests on my lap

after I sit in my chair. Against my throbbing dick.

“He said those things to hurt you. To come between us.” I run my fingers through her hair, moving it out of her face. “He needed you to truly hate me.” Contrary to her usual bullshit of *I hate you* she loves spewing at me.

I raise my hand. Crack the ruler on her ass. Her eyes fly open, but she moans.

“Thing is, you don’t belong to him. You’re *my* property.” The second time I smack the ruler on her ass has her clenching her thighs. “Bought.” Third. “Paid for.” Fourth. “Mine. For the rest of your life, whether you like it or not.”

Precum dampens my boxers the more I spank her ass and the undersides of her thighs. I spread her legs, lift her hips and crack my hand over her tight hole, her pussy.

My other hand is back to being flattened on her back as I push her down again.

I hate that it’s there. I want it around her throat while I pummel into her. I need to be inside her cunt. Need her clenching around me when she comes.

“You own my goddamn heart, Ophelia,” I roar, hurling the ruler at the glass windows. Briefly, I notice snow has begun falling outside. Then her hair is in my fist, and I’m eye to eye with her darkness. Her desire. “You could tell me that you don’t want any kids. You might not be able to have them. None of that would make a difference. I’m worse than any disease out there. More destructive than a nuclear bomb. There’s no getting rid of me. I. Own. You. Blink if you understand.”

She does, moaning through her gag.

God, I love her. Her obedience. How turned-on she is. How she lets me fight her demons.

I place her back on the desk, lean over her, rip her thong. I’m throbbing when I take my cock out and shove myself inside her.

Sounds of deep, twisted desire fill the office. Her moans. My grunts. Our bodies slapping together. Her wet pussy being fucked.

“Such a good girl. Look at you.” With one hand around her neck and the other on her hip, I thrust into her. Hard. Fast. Making sure her clit gets the friction she needs—the pain she desires from being bent over and fucked as

if she really were my property. “Being so good. Making a mess of my cock. Your cunt sucks me in and I’m soaked. Down to my balls.”

She’s almost there. Clenching around me. Staring at me and mumbling around the belt, “Please, please, please.”

This distance between us is killing me. While still fucking her, I undo the gag on her mouth, curl a hand around the front of her neck, and pull her up to me.

“Good fucking girl.” I lick the spit off her jaw, groaning at her sweet taste. “You’re my cum slut, aren’t you, Sonnet?”

A million yeses fly out of her swollen lips as she comes. Her pussy squeezes me, milking me. I won’t last long.

“My”—*thrust*—“office”—another, deeper—“whore. You’re going to be walking around here all day with my cum dripping down your thighs. With my babies in your womb.”

Her eyes roll, and I kiss her for all I’m worth. Bite and suck on her lips as I groan my release, thrusting my cum so deep that she’ll never get rid of me.

“Just you and me,” she whispers into my mouth.

I tell her what I haven’t told anyone before. A vow I’ll never break.

“Just you and me. Forever.”

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39

OPHELIA

"Alessandro, I believe you met my newest employee." James is at my right, looking down at me from a respectable distance. "Ophelia Louise Monroe."

My full name. How Topher referred to me on that auction stage a million years ago.

The head of the Cosa Nostra's brown eyes are huge as the realization sets in. It takes him a couple of minutes to pick his jaw up off the floor.

So much so that the bodyguards who sit on either side of him reach for their weapons, sensing danger. Their stares are trained on James and me, along with the two security men the firm has for these types of occasions.

I'm far less surprised to find the older man in one of Hawthorne Morgan's—soon-to-be just Hawthorne—conference rooms. James prepared me for this last night, right before we went to bed.

Being railed against his desk earlier didn't wipe out my memory. Nor did getting pampered by a hairstylist and a makeup artist an hour later.

I remember everything he tells me. He scheduled this meeting on purpose, my sneaky man. So that I'd be here. So that the man who'd been invested in buying me would get the message that I was off-limits.

I'm James's.

Forever.

Click-clack.

His bodyguards load their guns.

The firm's security does the same.

Alessandro huffs a laugh, patting their shoulders. “Stand down. I’m okay. Confused, but otherwise okay.”

He’s amused.

I’m less so. Memories of that terrifying night have bile rising in my throat. The hopelessness. Worrying about Baylor. About my chances of survival once James disappeared. The humiliation.

Nothing amusing about any of it.

“So.” Alessandro pushes his chair back so he can stand up, smoothing over his dark suit.

James senses my unease. Has to. That’s why he takes a half-step forward. Nothing major. Definitely not noticeable. Just enough to shield me from the world without being overbearing.

After all, he’s been training me for a reason. To be able to stand on my own two feet. With him, though, I’ll never be alone. Ever.

“Miss Monroe.” The mobster outstretches his hand. James gives me the briefest nod, telling me not to worry. So I don’t. I shake Alessandro’s hand. “Nice to meet you again.”

“Thank you.” I push out the bad thoughts, concentrating on James’s cum dripping out of my pussy, soaking my tights. “James tells me you weren’t disappointed for long.”

“Indeed.” His satisfied smirk widens before Alessandro lets go of my hand.

James did him a favor. It’s another lesson my man has taught me. Threatening people will only get us so far. If they hate us, they will find a way to retaliate against us.

We all take our seats at the table. I don’t miss how hot James is when he undoes the two buttons of his suit jacket with his big, strong hands.

“It’s usually Oliver handling the girls’ side of your business. While I’m pleasantly surprised to learn it was you who was the anonymous buyer who sent me my consolation prize, I can’t help but wonder.” His eyes go to James. “Where is he? His assistant said he was out for the day.”

“He took a day off.” James looks almost bored. Like Alessandro isn’t asking about the man we killed last night.

He’s mastered the art of keeping a straight face.

Just like he’s perfected the art of being a cruel, calculating bastard.

When he was done fucking me in his office this morning, he put his mouth to my ear and told me about his plans for baiting Topher. Tonight,

he’ll be leaving the doors to his home unlocked, counting on his son’s short temper to try to break into our home.

Giving us the perfect excuse to kill him and hopefully Camden, if he joins him.

It’s an open-and-shut case of self-defense; that’s what this trap is.

And just in case things go haywire, I have a backup plan of my own. A secret.

“Good for him.” Alessandro nods, his gaze no longer creepy. I won’t ever trust this man, but at least he keeps his pervy eyes to himself. “He’s been working himself to the bone. A week off wasn’t enough for him.”

“About that.” Watching James at work is thrilling.

The power he exudes when it’s just the two of us is different from what I’m seeing now.

This aura surrounding him. How he commands a room. Even one of the strongest criminals in New York listens to him with rapt attention. With respect.

“Yes?”

“As of today, our other business is officially closed.”

A decision James and I reached this afternoon. We haven’t thought about what to do with the law firm yet. The auction house will no longer exist, though. Neither James nor I are interested in running it.

Too many bad memories.

Plus, we won’t miss the money. We’re inheriting Oliver and Camden’s estate by default, since their lineage will come to an end soon. As per the contract between the two families, of course. We’re already set for life. Their wealth will ensure that our entire bloodline is taken care of.

And as for the leverage the auction house has provided him? We still have plenty of secrets in James’s safe.

“Oh? We’re talking about that?” Eyebrows scrunched, Alessandro leans his elbows on the conference table. “And here I thought you called me here to discuss our retainer fees.”

The ones they renegotiate every five years.

“Those won’t change for another five years. We, at Hawthorne Morgan, want to keep you satisfied.” That is if we stay here that long.

Alessandro cuts his gaze to me.

James clears his throat, leaning forward and demanding his attention. Sending him a *don’t even think about it* look. “*The retainer fees*,

Alessandro. Consider it compensation for the inconvenience caused by shutting down our other business."

"You could raise your fees, no problem there." His eyes are calculating. He licks his lips. "Keep me satisfied by selling me the auction house."

"No."

That was another aspect we discussed. We trust no one to keep the women safe like James and Oliver have. We went as far as to promise the employees that they'll stay on our payroll as long as they don't cross over to a competing business.

This way, they won't try to convince the women that the other place is safe when it isn't.

There aren't too many employees there anyway. Paying them a salary for basically doing nothing is sustainable.

"You haven't heard my offer."

"No, and that's final." James's firm refusal sends chills up my spine. His authoritative, low, and husky voice. It's addictive. "We won't be selling it to anyone else. Consider it off the table."

"What about your son? And Oliver? Don't they have a say in this?"

"Oliver and I have come to this decision together."

I press my lips together. Otherwise, I'd burst out laughing.

"Can't blame a man for trying." Alessandro lifts his hands in surrender. His laugh is short and polite.

"Good."

With that out of the way, he asks, "So, our new contract, where do I sign?"

James pushes the folder Andrea placed here earlier toward him.

Alessandro takes out an expensive pen from his jacket and signs, and James reaches for me under the table. He squeezes my thigh once.

I know what that squeeze means.

Good girl.

I'm his good girl.

A HAND on my mouth startles me awake. My eyes snap open into the dark room. Our bedroom.

The coldest blue eyes stare at me.

James. He's lying on top of me. His free hand is cupping my cheek. He's leaning on his forearm, a human shield around my body.

Shh, he mouths. This isn't his regular *shh* before he shoves his cock into me. He doesn't add *take it like a good girl*.

We have company.

The longer the silence stretches between us, the more aware I become of it. Of the sounds in our home.

Soft rain patters against the windows.

And heavy footsteps echo from the main floor.

I curl my fingers around James's wrist, communicating to him that I'm aware of our situation. That I won't scream.

Good thing I have everything set under the bed to help him.

If it comes to that.

He releases my mouth, crashing his lips to mine. It's a desperate kiss. Rough and ravenous. Teeth, lips, tongues. He sucks and tugs. My whole soul reaches for him.

He's hard, straining the sweatpants he put on after he fucked me in the shower.

"I'm going down there." One last grind, one last time that he lets me feel every ridge of his cock. "Stay here until I call you."

James is out of bed, going for the gun he left on his bedside table.

"Let me come with you." I'm up, swinging my feet to the floor. Yes, I have a plan. But it crushes me to think of him being down there alone. "Please."

"No." James loads his gun, his expression determined. "Seeing you will only trigger him further, and he's pretty untethered right now. He has to be if he has the nerve to show up here. I need to have the upper hand, and I can't do that if I'm worrying about you. If he's an unexpected loose cannon. I'll call you, I swear I will."

The twisting in my chest hurts. The thought of letting him out of my sight is devastating. I don't want to have to resort to plan B. I want to be there every step of the way.

"Are you sure?"

"Am I sure?" James grips my chin, lowering his face to mine until we're eye to eye. "Am I fucking sure? About what? About how I'll never let anyone hurt you? How I need to kill him for all the shit he's said and done

to you? The answer is yes. It'll always be yes. I'll do whatever it takes so we can spend the rest of our lives together. Our very, very long lives. Understood?"

Is it sick that I'm wet? That my nipples are poking through the thin material of my night T-shirt?

Probably.

I lean in to kiss him. Have to have another taste. Not the last one.

We'll have more.

So. Many. More.

"Understood."

"He didn't come here by himself," James whispers again as he checks his phone. I get up to see Topher and Camden on his screen, searching for us in every room.

"You said you didn't have cameras here." I frown at the screen, then at him.

"Temporary cameras. I put them up when you fell asleep. When I went downstairs to leave the front door unlocked."

"Okay. Go." My hands are all over him. His lean biceps, his taut chest beneath his black shirt. His neck. Hair. "Come back to me."

"Sonnet." His eyes pierce mine. "Always."

He means it. He really does.

It doesn't comfort me. I've already lost the two people I loved the most. They left me one day and never returned.

Death stole my parents away.

I'll be damned if I let it put its filthy hands on the love of my life.

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40

JAMES

A few seconds are all I have before Topher and Camden reach the stairwell.

They've been wandering through the main floor for long minutes. I get why. During the years that Topher lived here, I hadn't slept in my room much. There'd always been work to do. Heaps of it.

Oliver had twice as many paralegals and associates working on his cases. Preferred spending his waking hours mingling and bringing in clients. He'd join me when I went to threaten people. But office work never appealed to him.

I preferred the more hands-on approach. And since I never wanted to wake Topher up, I spent my nights on the main floor, out of earshot.

Now, there isn't a night I don't spend next to Ophelia in bed.

The woman I'll burn down cities for.

"He's not here," Topher whispers.

His voice comes to my left. They're in the media room, where he used to watch television while I worked over the weekends.

The memory stings. Not as much as the thought of Ophelia raped and lying in a pool of her own blood.

"Probably in bed, fucking his whore." Camden snorts, sounding drunk.

My fingers press into the handle of my gun. Fire scorches my skin. My veins.

His whore.

Talking about her like he has the right.

Focus.

I step away from the stairwell, walking deeper into the main floor.

“Let’s go.” My son, on the other hand, sounds sober.

He should’ve noticed that I hadn’t locked the doors or gate. He should’ve been suspicious.

He isn’t.

What a disappointment.

“You’re not going anywhere.” I hold up the gun when they come out of the room. Both of them are in black hoodies and jeans like common thieves. Pathetic.

Topher doesn’t hesitate, pointing his gun at me. “You’re the one who isn’t going anywhere.”

A strange feeling races through me. It’s got nothing to do with fear. Even when Camden holds up his gun clumsily.

Something’s up. Ophelia.

Our connection is strong. Unbreakable.

She’s defying my order. I just know it.

Nothing can be done about it now.

Fuck.

“Is that so?” I tilt my head. The gun stays right where it is. “Put your guns down. Back the fuck up. You do that, and I might let you leave here with your lives intact.”

“Liar.” Camden’s hand shakes.

His gun shakes.

“You’re right, I am.” I suck in a deep breath. Expand my lungs. Let out a slow exhale. I’ve got all the time in the world as far as they’re concerned. “I’ll kill you too. For threatening Ophelia. For the audacity to come after either of us. However, I could be merciful. Give you a swift death. Or I could choose not to.”

“What happened to you?” Topher’s expression is a mixture of hurt and disgust. “You’re the one who taught me to never get attached to a woman. Now you’re willing to die for one?”

Ophelia isn’t just any woman.

She’s my everything. My purpose in life. A true, valid reason to wake up in the morning.

The things I do to her when we’re alone, she loves it. The humiliation. Being degraded.

She’s mine.

And she’s definitely not his to ruin.

In another life, I would’ve explained it to him. In this one, it’s too late. He’s had his chance. Maybe I shouldn’t have let him spend hours with Oliver.

Maybe.

What’s done is done.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Don’t you dare come to my house and question me.”

“The fuck I will.” He takes a step closer, aiming for my chest. Reminding me of my father. Only difference is, I’m not wearing bulletproof clothes tonight. That’s how confident I am. “You’re outnumbered. Outmatched. I’m betting your fuck toy has no idea how to use a gun. Just like she knows jack shit about practicing law. My God, Dad. This is one hell of a midlife crisis.”

Silence is all he gets.

“I told her what you do to women who give you babies.”

More silence.

No point in telling him his mother wasn’t raped. Wasn’t forced. That she didn’t die by my hands. No one has the right to my secrets. My weaknesses.

No one but Ophelia.

Camden burps. Repulsive. “Where’s my dad?”

I stare at Topher as I answer him. “Where he usually goes when he disappears.” Taunting a drunk, armed man is dangerous. I fear fucking nothing. “Shoving his dick into one or ten women.”

“Motherfucker.” His steps thud on the wood floor. I count four heavy ones. “You’re holding him here, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“I’ll go upstairs.” The words are mumbled. I understand him anyway. Loud and clear. “Use my gun to rape your bitch. I bet she’d sing then. She’ll tell me where Dad is. While your brain is splattered on the floor.”

Topher advances on me. Two feet closer, the barrel of his gun still aimed at my chest.

He’s a lousy shot, and we both know that. He’s been to a gun range twice. Even this close, he’s not sure he’ll get me.

He’s terrified he might miss.

That my retribution will cost him his life.

He’s already lost it. He’ll figure it out soon enough.

Once I take out the stumbling drunk. The slurring asshole who dares to threaten Ophelia.

“Come anywhere near her. Go ahead, prick. Try me.” I don’t wait to attack him, moving closer to Topher while keeping my gaze fixed on Camden. “You’ll be begging for death by the time I’m done with you. I’ll feed you your insides. Your fingers. You’ll choke and gag on them, asshole, and you won’t be able to stop thinking of this moment. So please, test me. Be my guest.”

Camden has the sense to shut up. His face pales. Turns a light shade of green. His grip on the gun loosens.

My lips curve up.

I’m not one to smile. To gloat.

This is a different kind of victory. This is the beginning of my new life.

Taking out the trash never felt so good.

My smile twists into a sneer when I feel it.

I feel her.

Ophelia. Again.

Her movement. Her breaths. The cadence of her heartbeats. Slow. Steady.

She better not be outside our room.

She fucking better not be, or so help me…

“Big words for a dead man,” Topher repeats the threat. He could pull the trigger. Put a bullet through me. I could bleed out. But he has to talk. Idiot. “Your reign is over, Father. Give up.”

Camden is a worthless, shivering fool. I fix my attention back on Topher. Tell him the words that will hurt him more than anything. “The only thing I’m giving up on is you. You’ve had plenty of chances to do better. You’ve squandered every single one.”

“I—You—” His chin dimples, finger tightening on the trigger.

“Your mother would’ve been disappointed.”

The air in the house shifts. I sense the blood rushing through Ophelia’s veins.

Impossible. She’s upstairs.

I ordered her to stay there. I—

“Die!” he shouts through tears when he fires at me.

At the worst possible timing.

My heart stills. Throat locked.

She's here. She's here. She's here.

"No!" Ophelia runs, speeding out of nowhere to stand before me.

She takes the bullet for me.

I'm not myself. Not in my body. I don't even breathe.

Somehow, though, I move. Wrap an arm around her stomach and pin her to my body. My head tips down to see red liquid bursting from her chest. Dripping down the gray sweatshirt she had put on before coming down here to save me.

Her face is white. Mouth gaping. Air pushes out of it.

One exhale.

She doesn't breathe back in. Or she does, and I don't see it.

I don't fucking see it.

Snap out of it. Remember who the hell you are.

She needs me. She's hurt. Hurt bad.

Bleeding.

My heart breaks. Crashes to the floor. All the way to the center of the earth.

The corners of my eyes sting.

The hollowness in my chest, it hurts. The pain is unlike anything I've ever experienced.

There's nothing left of me.

Not my ribs. Not my heart. Not my lungs. I doubt there's a drop of blood left in my body.

I'm an empty shell.

So how does everything hurt so bad? Why am I being stabbed by a thousand invisible knives?

Without her, I…

Mourning for her while she might still be alive is a luxury I don't have.

I'll lose my shit later.

This can't be it.

She's not dead.

Can't be.

Protect her. I have to protect her.

I'm back in my body in a split second. Fast enough to notice that her hands aren't on me.

She's not fighting.

My Ophelia always fights.

Camden laughs. I hear him while I stare at my son. While I put her down and come between her and them.

“She deserved it—” Topher starts.

Two shots to the head, and Camden is down. Torturing him would mean putting Ophelia’s life—*she’s alive, damn it*—in danger.

I won’t allow that to happen.

Fuck.

The hollowness in my chest changes. Pressure. I’m consumed by it. Almost drowning. That’s how awful this pain is.

I’m dying. My body is shutting down on itself.

Ophelia.

The first night in the cell, how I spread her legs. Checked her. Treated her like property. A piece of land I owned. She was so sweet.

The evenings that followed.

Every meal, every time I touched her. She wanted me more and more. Needed me.

Fuck.

Her angry tears in my bed. Her soft smiles. Her depraved desires.

All these moments are close and yet so far away.

As I stare into Topher’s blue, shocked eyes, the memories of her drift even farther.

Come back. Stay. Don’t go. Don’t leave me here alone.

I can’t live without you.

I’m talking to the memories of her.

I’m keeping them. We’ll have so many more of them.

A light touch on my heel. A brush of a delicate hand.

I can’t let my imagination get the better of me.

“Dad, please, I—”

Pow. Pow. Pow. Pow.

I’m not sure how many rounds I empty into Topher’s face.

What I’m sure of is that I didn’t miss a single one.

He’s unrecognizable by the time he drops to the floor in a loud *thunk*.

The pressure in my chest intensifies as I consider what I have to do next. A rope cinching around my lungs. A thousand-ton brick crushes me beneath its weight.

I won’t survive it if I turn around and she’s dead.

Throughout my entire life, I've been invincible.

Vicious. Destructive.

I'm none of those things. Not anymore.

I'm all emotion. All pain. All hurt.

Torn from the inside.

With my vision darkening around the edges.

With bile rising in my throat. With what's left of my soul preparing for the worst.

I turn around.

Drop to my knees.

I should check for her pulse. Should press on her chest to stop the bleeding.

Though it looks like it's stopped on its own.

My body has other plans.

My hands cradle her face. Her soft cheeks. Her delicate jaw. My thumbs find her lips and swipe them.

That's what will keep her alive. Forcing her back to life. To me.

"Ophelia." Her eyes are closed, but—

But—

Her hand reaches up. Half an inch off the ground.

"Ophelia." I bury my fingers in her face. My voice is rough. Demanding. Ordering her to stay alive. "You're sorely mistaken if you think you're getting away from me. Come back to me. Come the fuck back. I'm not doing this life without you, you hear?"

"James," she mumbles as her hand slides up to my wrist.

The other one goes to her chest.

The corners of her lips curl up. Barely.

"Shh, baby." I stroke her cheeks. Reverently. Adoringly. I still sound like the bastard that I am. My voice remains harsh and emotionless. The voice that made her fall for me. The voice that makes her bend to my will. "Rest. As long as you're back, you can rest. We have a doctor on staff, remember?"

Her eyes flutter. Lids heavy.

I have to detach one hand from her. Have to shove it into my sweats pocket. Reach for my phone.

Fuck, I have to move the other one too. Stop the bleeding.

I press my hand on top of the one she has over her chest.

Something isn’t right. Something’s out of place.

The smell. It’s strange.

This must be what happens when a person loses their sanity. They imagine things.

“The ICU room we have in the backyard? You remember that too?” I talk to her instead of drowning beneath layers of fear. “Our doctor will take you there. You’re going to be just fine. We’ll take care of you until the paramedics get here.”

When I built the room right next to the staff quarters, I considered how insane it might look. How paranoid. Then again, my father might still be here if he had one.

“No… No need.” Her eyes open. The fathomless dark pools find me. “I’m fine. Hurt, but fine.”

Shit. She’s hallucinating.

The phone rings. One. Two.

“Mr. Hawthorne?” my doctor answers on the third ring.

Ophelia pries her hand from beneath me. She slaps the device off my hand, causing it to crash to the floor.

“Get in here,” I shout, staying on top of her. I won’t leave her for nothing. “Bring a gurney. I’ll kill you if you’re not here within the next two minutes.”

Then my crazy, unhinged woman does what only a crazy, unhinged woman would. She shoves her bloodied fingers into my mouth.

On an impulse, I suck on them. The animal in me will always devour every part of her.

“Taste,” she whispers, her voice hoarse. “Shut up and taste it.”

My nostrils flare as soon as I realize what she’s smearing on my tongue. My eyebrows fly up. I wrap my hand around her wrist, pulling it out.

In a second, her sweatshirt is no more. I tear it off her, staring at the mess beneath it.

A clear plastic bag has been ripped to shreds there by the bullet. What’s left of it is pinned to her chest by a blue elastic band I recognize from my gym at home.

Her body is unharmed. The bullet Topher fired is lying there. Between plastic, ketchup, and water.

Any other day, I wouldn’t have missed it. The light color isn’t a deep crimson red at all. I wouldn’t have recognized the sweet smell.

Today isn’t any other day.

“Bulletproof shirt?” I run my hands over the thick liquid. Over her shirt. Her navel. Stomach. Back up to her breasts. Her collarbone.

She’s alive.

“Learned from the best.” She coughs. The bullet hit her hard. Her cheeks flush, and she tugs my hand, pulling me to her. I press my lips to hers, stroke her cheeks with my knuckles. “From my owner.”

“Why the hell would you do that?” I speak against her lips. My mouth brushes hers. I suck in her air. Give her all of mine. “You could’ve died, Ophelia.”

“Mr. Hawthorne.” Doctor Gable is breathless. I don’t hear the gurney dragging. He must’ve brought someone to help him carry it behind him. “Sir, where are you?”

“Over here,” I say.

“I couldn’t lose you too.” A sob breaks from Ophelia. Then a cough. “I would’ve died without you. Do you understand?”

Her sobs and coughs tear through me. Right to the bone.

Then unhinged laughter follows as she digs her fingernails into my skin. I let her.

I let her be whatever she wants.

She’s alive.

Until the end of time, she’ll always be mine.

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EPILOGUE

Ophelia

Topher's wake was lovely. A last goodbye worthy of one of New York's most powerful and wealthiest men's sons.

Every person who attended it today knew why Topher died. The reason that had been released to the press, anyway.

Camden had accused James of Oliver's disappearance and was after blood. According to what Topher said when he'd barged into our home, he believed his friend. Thought his dad would kill him next.

My poor would-be stepson. So troubled. So volatile. So very violent. He did have a disturbing past, didn't he? With his mom's disappearance and all.

What was James supposed to do to protect himself in his own home?

Shoot them, of course.

That was his account of events.

I supported his version, word for word.

Our interviews were the only way to corroborate our story.

The footage from the cameras installed around the house? Magically wiped out.

The staff? They heard nothing until James called the doctor.

The police chief was happy to make the story go away. Close it and avoid fucking with a man who holds some of his deepest, darkest secrets.

Anyway.

A week has passed since the home invasion. James is back to spanking me and bossing me around. I'm practically healed. The bruise on my chest is no longer a deep shade of purple but has now turned a yellowish hue.

Not like anyone could see it during the wake. My black A-line dress has a high neckline and does a great job of hiding that area.

And the fact that my breasts are a little bit swollen.

"Thank you for coming." I hear James in the entryway. Hear the soft click of the door closing.

My heart races faster at the sound of him turning the lock. My hand curls tighter around the plastic object inside my purse.

James questioned me about carrying a purse in my own home.

My excuse was that it would look better to the outside world. We didn't have to rub our happiness in everyone's faces. I could be a guest for a day. Until we made our relationship official.

It was better this way for everyone involved. No one has asked questions, not even Sage, my former roommate. Especially her. She did her best to avoid me, James, and basically everyone else by standing in the corner of the room.

Understandable.

I would've done the same.

"Sonnet."

A shiver runs up my spine. The authority in his voice will always have heat pooling between my thighs.

"Over here." Alone. I pulled Clara to the side earlier and asked her to leave when I noticed the people were starting to trickle out.

My pulse kicks up when his steps are louder. When he's nearer.

When he enters the room, walking toward me.

My man. My owner. My everything.

James is as tall and imposing as he was the first time I met him. His tailored black suit sits on his lean body so well.

Jealousy looks even better on him. He grips my chin, lowering his face to mine. Blocking out everything else.

Topher's urn, mainly.

For the slightest chance anyone would have the urge to dig up his body, we had to have him cremated. Once we get to Fiji—a vacation to our potential future home—we're spreading it out into the ocean.

But he had to play the grieving father's part, and so the urn stayed.

James hates it. That his son can still sort of look at me.

"Is there a reason you're not waiting for me bent over in our bedroom?"

He ordered me to do it this morning. So that Topher wouldn't…you guessed it.

Look at me. I'm giddy, suppressing a laugh of excitement.

It's such a turn-on that he's jealous like that. That I'm the only one in his world.

"Answer me." His eyes are dark. Lust bleeds through these icy blues. So much of it that it's hard to breathe in here.

My body reacts to him. Nipples hard. Heated cheeks. My thighs clench, pussy desperate to have him inside.

"So that's your answer? Being a brat?" He licks my jaw, my mouth. He bites my lip, tugs at it, and lets go. "Are you asking for a punishment, Ophelia? Before you have my cock shoved inside you?"

My knees buckle, and he catches me, one arm around my back, pressing my body to his. His cock jerks against my belly. I moan. He smirks.

Just like he did last night before he fucked me.

"Horny little thing. You need me to hurt that sweet cunt, don't you?" Gone is the smirk. His lips press into a fine line. Cock throbbing between us. "Oh, I see. This isn't about sex for you today, Sonnet. Tell me what's going on, or I'll have to spank it out of you."

His rough treatment. Dirty words. Gravelly voice. I could come on the spot for this man. Another second of this, and I'll melt into a puddle.

Except I have news to deliver. A secret I've been dying to tell him since this morning.

Since James went to instruct the staff on what's expected of today. I went to the bathroom and locked myself in there. And then…

"I could tell you." I bite my lip, burning up from the way his gaze cuts to the movement. "But I'd much rather show you."

"Ophelia."

The familiar warning doesn't scare me. It turns me on.

Injects courage into my veins.

I lift my hand.

The pregnancy test is there. Between us. No taking it back now.

A moment passes, then James's eyes focus.

He reads the word *pregnant* on the digital screen.

Blinks. Scowls.

“Fuck. Baby.” He steals the test from my grip, releasing his hold on my back to cup my jaw instead.

His touch is rough. His kiss hurts in a delicious kind of way.

Then he moans into my mouth, and I have to, I just *need* to touch him. I cling to the sides of his neck, yanking him closer. Arching my back, needing my sensitive nipples to feel his hard body.

“Please.” The emptiness in my pussy is killing me. With every passing second, my need for him morphs. Evolves. Becomes intolerable. “James, please.”

He’s harsh and cruel, pulling away. Glowering at me. “How long have you been keeping this from me?”

Through the lust, the need, the unquenchable desires, I see him. He’s not mad.

He has depravity on his mind.

I want his sickness. His punishments. His humiliation.

My owner could do anything, and I’d beg him for more.

“Hours,” I whisper. “So. Many. Hours.”

“My properties don’t get to omit truths from me.” He steps back, leaving me alone. While he watches me, his gaze detached as ever.

He’s looking at me as if I were truly his property.

It’s mortifying. It’s so hot.

My lungs burn. I clasp my hands in front of me. “I’m sorry.”

“Bad girl.” Warmth flashes across his face.

He’s pleased. So pleased that I almost burst out crying.

I won’t.

This isn’t the game we’re playing today.

His warmth vanishes, wiped out by his steely expression. James is back to being as cold as the weather outside, with the snow falling against the windows.

“You’ve earned your punishment.” His knuckles go white around the pregnancy test. The black ink on his hand can’t hide this. That’s how tight he’s gripping it. How much he wants this baby and me. “It’ll serve as a reminder to never, ever lie to me again.”

“I didn’t lie.” Being a brat always makes his punishments worse. Always makes me come harder. “Plus, I said I’m sorry.”

“Your apology means nothing.” His voice is lower than before. Quieter. More lethal. “On your hands and knees.”

“You’re not listening.” I’m taking a risk by taunting him. Poking this monstrous bear. “I didn’t lie, and I said—”

James’s fist winds in my hair that I’ve left loose today. He yanks on it. Forces my eyes up to meet his heated ones.

God, he’s gorgeous when he’s like this. In control. Bathing me in his darkness.

He shakes his head, slowly. Menacingly.

I shut up. Let him do whatever he likes to me, as always.

And he does. While this strong, awful man manhandles me to the floor, he never lets go of the pregnancy test.

It’s depraved and wrong to play this game. With the pregnancy test still in his hand. With Topher’s urn in the room.

Neither of us seems to care.

“That’s it,” James praises when I’m on my hands and knees.

He’s at my side, his hot gaze roaming my body. Then he crouches, lifting my knees one at a time to pull my dress up from under them before placing them softly on the floor.

“Why are you doing this?” Two can play this game where he’s my big bad wolf, and I’m still his captive. Still in the cell.

“Why?” *Tsk, tsk.* “Hmm. You really don’t know. What am I going to do with you?”

His hands are on my body. Moving along the curve of my spine. My ass. Bunching my dress up my thighs.

“Don’t hurt me, please,” I fake-beg, knowing full well he can see the dark spot on my panties.

“You’re such a slut for this.”

I scream when his hand cracks on my ass. I melt for him when he does that again.

“Desperate to be my filthy girl. Shaking with how badly you need to be punished. To be humiliated. By me, and only me. Isn’t that right?”

I’m panting, painfully needing him. He brushes my hair to the side, to my back. So I can see him. So he can look at me while he tears my panties off me.

“James!”

“You’ve already ruined them yourself, Sonnet.”

To make matters worse—to embarrass me until I'm burning everywhere for him—he brings them up to his face, studying them. Pressing the soaked material to his nose and inhaling. He's doing it deliberately slow to mortify me.

He succeeds. I'm struggling to hold his gaze. I wish the ground would swallow me up. That I'd disappear.

I wish I could have him inside me. On me. To have him hurt me like only he knows.

"Were you that wet for me?" He shoves the black material into his pants pocket, just as he had done with the gold keys to the cell all those weeks ago. "Or for him?"

He jerks his chin toward the urn, coaxing an undignified gasp out of me. I choke on air, eyebrows shooting up.

Ignoring my shocked expression, he holds my gaze. Serious. Demanding.

"Well?" He smacks my ass in the same place that's sore by now.

"You," I whimper. This shouldn't be such a turn-on. This is fucked-up, dirty game we're playing.

But right and wrong don't matter in this room. There's just us here. Dark and twisted and *us*. "It was for you. Always you."

"Hmm." He strokes my hair, running the pregnancy test through the strands in a possessive gesture. "Better, but too little, too late. I'm still not convinced."

Sliding the hand he has in my hair down my back, over the scar, he lights up every nerve ending on my body.

"About what?" I gasp and moan, clenching my thighs on air.

"That you really want this, me. That I'm the one who gets you so hot you can hardly stand it."

"You are."

My shaky words go right over his head. He spanks me, and this one hurts everywhere.

I'm almost there, almost coming on nothing, when he shoves two fingers into my pussy.

"Oh God." Maybe it's the pregnancy making me this sensitive. This feral. Could be.

Mostly, it's James.

Always James.

“That’s right. That’s what I am. Your fucking God.” He’s moved so he’s kneeling, pulling his fingers out of me. I cry a desperate *no*.

“That’s a good girl.” The evidence of my arousal is obvious on his fingers. In the white light of the snow. I’m soaked and panting when he puts them in his mouth and groans. He’s just as feral as I am. “And good girls get their reward.”

“Reward?”

Another spanking leaves a wet mark on my ass. James’s face is all sharp angles. The muscles are pulled tight. He’s barely hanging on himself. His cock is about to tear through his pants, the only indication that he’s as desperate as I am.

“You’re going to do even better for me, won’t you?” Gracefully, James leans toward me, placing his hand on the floor.

“How? Tell me how.”

“You don’t need me to tell you.” He’s grip on my ass is going to leave a mark. I don’t understand what he’s asking of me, why his hand is on the floor. “You know what to do.”

“Tell me. Please.” I’m genuinely confused. Too happy. Too hot. Too needy.

“Come here.” Pressure on my hips. He’s pushing me down. Lower, lower, lower, until…

“Oh.” The tip of the pregnancy test grazes my clit, sending sparks through my body.

It doesn’t get more wrong than this. More filthy.

Wait, it does, and it’s my fault. I can’t help myself. I’m grinding my hips, shuddering at the friction. At the pleasure of it.

“That’s it.” James’s jaw tics, his breath shallow. He wants this badly. He gets off on debasing me. “That’s my good fucking girl. Letting me use your body. Turn you into a fucked-up little toy.”

He trails his hand up to the small of my back, nudging me forward and pushing me even lower than before. My legs shake with the effort. With the desire swarming through my veins.

James positions my dripping hole on top of the pregnancy test. He narrows his eyes, trailing his gaze along my parted lips, and my eyes widen in response.

“No.” *Yes.*

“Do as you’re told.” He changes his grip on my hip so I don’t collapse to the floor. “Fuck the stick, Ophelia. I’m not putting my dick into you before you make yourself come on it.”

I’m aching to be good for him. I try to, rising and lowering myself on the positive pregnancy test. But my muscles are trembling despite James holding me up.

“Faster.” James’s fingers bite into my flesh. “Deeper. Take it.”

“Trying.” My thighs scream in protest. I’ll die before I stop grinding my hips.

He’s helping me, he’s there for me. Same as always. Supporting me, lifting me, shoving me down. Telling me I’m so fucking good. How hard I make him.

It’s not enough. I can’t reach the floor. Can’t make it sink all the way in.

“Ophelia.” *Spank*, and he’s grabbing me again. “You told me you were wet for *me*. Desperate for me. Prove it. Prove to Topher that you were never his. That you’re strong enough to fuck this stick because I said so. Because it’s me you want. Because you’ll do everything and anything for me.”

This is the worst.

We’re going to go to hell for this.

No other place I’d like to spend the afterlife in. No other person I’d rather burn with in eternal damnation.

I flicker my gaze to the urn sitting on one of the end tables. James bought the best one for his son. Gold. Handmade. It costs more than what most people make in a year.

But I don’t care about the vase.

I care about what’s in it.

The man who tricked me. Who planned to hurt me and James.

“I’d choose your dad in a thousand lifetimes,” I hiss at the urn. James rubs my ass. Pushes me another inch onto the pregnancy test stick, and I give in. Moving past the exertion and the discomfort. “Die a million deaths so his heart keeps beating. So he can keep fucking me like no other man ever could. So he can love me every day for the rest of my life.”

“Fuck. Fuck.” James is no longer tentative. Doesn’t adjust me or guide me. He’s close to me, his body pinned to mine, his hand forcing me up and down on the stick. “Come, Ophelia. Show him what a good slut you are for me. I need to fuck you. Need inside you. Do it.”

As obscene as it is, as filthy, I finally find the strength to do it. I fuck the stick, looking at the man who saved me, mainly from myself.

He says dirty words to me. He hurts me. He devours me with his gaze.

I come for him. White-hot light bursts from inside me, turning me inside out. I cry out James's name like he's my God. Like he's my everything.

He really is.

The stick goes flying in the air.

"Yes. Fuck. Such a good girl." He flips me on my back, lowering me to the floor, towering over me. His mouth is on my neck, his teeth grazing my hypersensitive skin. One hand is flat on my stomach, right over my navel. "I'll always be here for you. I'm never leaving. You and our babies will always be safe. I'll spend the rest of my life protecting you." He sucks on my neck, groaning. "Fuck."

Ripping the dress off my body, his mouth delivers sensual, hungry kisses to my bare stomach. His hands travel up my thighs, to my waist, the undersides of my breasts. When he climbs back up my body, he tastes every inch of me. Biting. Sucking.

My nipples are sore from his attention. From his teeth and fingers. I moan louder when he apologizes with his tongue.

"Marry me," he demands once he's balls deep inside me. With his beautiful face above mine. "Be my wife, Ophelia."

"Thought—" Difficult. To. Breathe. I'm being pounded by a savage. An animal. "That marriage is overrated."

"Past tense. And this isn't up for debate. Your consent isn't required." He grips the back of my thigh, lifting it to fuck me harder. "You're going to be my wife. We're getting the hell out of this town. To a new, better place. Clean slate. You and me, wife."

I cup his cheeks. Cry and gasp for air as I come a second time. "Yes. Yes, I'll be your wife. Yes, I'll disappear with you. I love you. I love you so much."

His dirty talk never fails to push me over the edge.

Apparently, my love declaration has the same effect on him.

He groans, kissing me with everything he's got while he empties himself into me.

"I love you." His forehead is hot against mine. The slow roll of his hips lulls me into a sweet trance. "I own you. You're mine, and I'm yours. Forever. Say you understand."

“I do. Forever.”
“Forever.”

The End.

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AFTERWORD

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